Makesong Passage

A Socratic Sidekick Student Workbook for Narrative, Argument, and Authentic Voice ELA Reading Practice

Robert A. Marmaduke

Folios from the Edge of Language and Light

Makesong Passage

Robert A.Marmaduke

MAKESONG

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Makesong Passage(c) is a work of human authorship and artistic direction created in collaboration with AI tools, (ChatGPT - DALL·E), (Gemini - Nano) and Deep Seek, as part of an author-illustrator guided creative process. All text and images were sketched and scripted, collated and curated by the author as artistic director / production editor.

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Creative Process Notes

This book was created through an iterative author–AI collaboration from September 2025 to February 2026. The author generated all original sketches, scripts, characters, narratives, prompts, direction, edits, and all curatorial decisions for each image-and-prose folio, including folio assembly layout and pre-press production.

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Acknowledgement

It was a sunny day and there you were, on the bench, with your college sweatshirt and your Big Girl reading glasses, holding a novel, right there by the sand-and-sea strand.

I saw you and laughed, ‘Hey, what a great day to read!’

You broke into peals of laughter. “I KNOW!” Then you added in a rush, *“I left my phone at home! I don’t need to carry it anymore! They won’t know where I am!”*

I got caught up in it with her. “*I always leave my phone at home too!* Then they’ll yell at me, ‘I texted you three times, *where were you!”* Hey, guess what, I don’t care! Ha,ha,ha.

We were laughing like prisoners escaped from i-Alcatraz, who had made it to shore.

In front of us two kids started jumping cartwheels off a huge driftwood root stump.

Someone nearby shouted ‘Did you see that?! *A killer whale breached!”*

Our whole day became a soap-bubble kite-flying freedom carnival.

Brrrt. Pop-pop!

🖤

—Me

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Introduction

To the Educator:

The Makesong™ Architecture of Cognitive Acquisition system is designed to give you resources, provide clearer insight into student growth, and re-engage hesitant learners.

These Art-and-Story folios are an evidence-based praxis, forged in my own teaching experience across U.S. and international high schools and community colleges, and validated by formal Superintendent observation, —especially for students traditionally labeled "at-risk," whom we see as "at-promise." **We get their hands waving again**!

Welcome to the **Makesong Dual-System**—a comprehensive literacy engine designed to transform students from skilled Readers into authentic Writers by bridging cultural resonance with data-driven mastery. This series consists of two integrated companion volumes: **Makesong Passage** (The Reader) and **Makesong Prestige** (The Writer).

I. The Sequence: From Analysis to Agency

The pedagogical journey begins with the Reader: **Makesong Passage**. Here, students engage in **"Hot Iron" reading**—high-frequency, 15-minute immersive encounters with 1,000-word narratives set in authentic global contexts, formatted as Art-over-Prose.

This growth stage is dedicated to **Acquisition and Alignment**: building the foundational cognitive ‘habitus’ for focused attention, evidence-based reasoning, and empathetic perspective-taking. Mastery of this analytical core is the reading fluency prerequisite for **Makesong Prestige**, where students advance to **Agency and Autonomy**. In this second volume, students apply their analytical skills to the creative act of narrative construction, synthesizing their own original work within the same rich inclusive folio frameworks.

II. The Science: Mastery Through Structured Engagement

Makesong is built on a **Mastery Learning** model, informed by the **Neurodevelopmental Framework** (Executive Function) and the iterative **DMAIC (Define, Measure, Analyze, Improve, Control)** methodology. The **Makesong Prestige** Writing Workbook addresses several pedagogical themes:

A-L. ‘Onboarding’ Stories Building ‘AI in the Classroom’ Expectation;
I. Streets, Stories, & Strangers: Global Locales & Human Connection;
II. Animals, Ecosystems, and the Beyond-Only-Human World;
III. STEM, Innovation, and Human Ingenuity;
IV. Language, Art, and Storytelling;
V. SEL, Resilience, and Reflection

We treat our folios as **Cognitive Training Modules**. They are safe, structured spaces for students to grapple with universal themes—integrity, courage, sacrifice—through specific, sensory-rich dilemmas. Students decide whether a street artist should 'sell out,' if a lost phone holds evidence too dangerous to report, or how a dance crew can adapt when its leader is injured. They don't learn only about themes; they inhabit them. We avoid ideological control prescription; instead, we build their **Executive Function** and **Ethical Reasoning** required for principled thought and action in a complex world.

This agency is structured through our 'Knot' typology—a curated set of narrative crises. Each folio presents a distinct cognitive challenge, ensuring students build a flexible toolkit rather than facing repetitive problems: from simple **Narrative Invitation** to complex **Ethical Choices**, **Tactical Puzzles**, **Persuasive Challenges**, **Personal Revelations**, and **Creative Acts**, throughout the Five Themes.

This progression systematically trains their neurolinguistic networks—Orienting to the sensory world; Alerting to the inciting incident; and Applying Executive Controls, to navigate the specific "knot" of the folio dilemma. Students face variations of the knot problem in a global context, then they build a flexible and resilient toolkit for agency.

III. The Outcome: The Resonance Mapping

Using these Themes and Knots in creative writing allows more than a Gradebook. It is a **Resonance Map**—a dynamic portrait of the whole learner *that AI can multi-tier evaluate*. Administrators and teachers gain clear, actionable insights into a student's progress in Reader **Analytical Extraction** (Passage) versus Writer **Creative Synthesis** (Prestige).

```
OUTPUT:
- Knowledge acquisition
- Character formation
- Civic literacy
- Rhetorical mastery
- Cultural transmission
```

By integrating a **Review Sentiment Data Sheet** for challenged or hesitant Readers and Writers, in pre-prompted Fillable PDF format, we provide authentic proof of engagement, showing the Art-and-Prose presented material resonated with the student's own sense of truth, –even if they aren’t fully ready for a long-form 500-word written response.

The Makesong Architecture of Cognitive Acquisition teaches literacy, as it constructs their cognitive agentic character for thoughtful, capable, and engaged citizenship.[1]

[1] 1 - Compliance Note: The Makesong Method™ assessment framework is designed to align with transparency and accountability standards set by the EU AI Act (2024) and the U.S. National AI Initiative Act (15 U.S.C. § 9401), ensuring that (future) AI-assisted analytics remain secondary to human-in-the-loop (HITL) pedagogical verification, within the guidelines of a Modeling Response.

Makesong Prestige - Introductory Pedagogy Discussion

Abstract: The Makesong Prestige AI^3 Vision - Artifact, Intelligence, Agency

The *Makesong Prestige* ELA Writing Achievement Student Workbook is more than a collection of Art-and-Prose writing prompt folios; it is a precision-engineered "Learning Ecosystem" a curated library of folios, with core implementations typically utilizing a sequence of 36 folios per semester—each thematic, high-interest narrative anchors—to bridge the gap between foundational literacy and sophisticated rhetorical agency.

By integrating Socratic AI interaction with Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) frameworks, Makesong Prestige creates a "high-ceiling, low-floor" environment where every student, Foundational to AP / Adult, can find their voice and claim their intellectual inheritance.

Executive Summary: For Principals & Superintendents

Makesong Prestige addresses the three greatest challenges in modern secondary education: Engagement, Differentiation, and Alignment.

▸Engagement: A dozen onboarding sequence folios capture reluctant learners through immersive 'Grimoire' artifacts that use mythic narrative to frame core human questions.

▸Differentiation: The curriculum is structured into Themes, Complexity Tiers and Knot Choices, allowing for seamless integration across General Ed, SPED, and Accelerated tracks without stigmatizing hesitant learners. The folio settings are global and inclusive.

▸Alignment: Every Folio is cross-mapped to CCSS ELA Standards and core SEL pillars, providing a turnkey solution for district-wide reporting and measurable 'agentic' growth. This challenges the critical intersection of **Academic Rigor** and **Student Engagement**.

- 🔬 **Explainable AI (XAI):** Every lesson is cross-mapped to CCSS ELA Standards and core SEL pillars, ensuring Student growth is measurable and meaningful.
- 🤖 **Pedagogical Agent:** From the "Peaches Hothouse" to "Threads of Light and Smoke' folio in the Reader **Makesong Passage**, then the "Cartographer's Dream" to "One Got Away" folio in **Makesong Prestige**, we move students from passive scrolling to active, self-agentic participation, within a dazzling world of stories.
- 📈 **Value-Added Modeling / Process Analytics:** The established folio sequence is curated to build conceptual momentum. Teachers can then follow this proven pathway or, as they gain familiarity, freely select folios from the library to meet specific classroom moments. The sequence will align with Analytics progress.

🧪 The Purpose: From Rote-Transmission to Self-Cultivation

AI'Creatives ELA Reading & Writing Achievement Resources reframes everything:

Old Paradigm (Rigid Natural Selection)	New Paradigm (Breeding Traits for Self-Selection)	The Role of AI-Agentics in the Classroom	The Makesong Method™ Mandate (Resource Curation)
Transmit antique knowledge as 'answers'. 'Survival of the Fittest' as rote memorizer.	Cultivate the ability to ask bold questions. 'Survival of the Best Adapted' through iterative inquiry.	"AI as an XAI full partner, transparent, line-by-line rationale for feedback, not verdicts."	**We supply the citable evidence.** Our folios generate the unique, "thermal gold" moments in student prose that make XAI reports meaningful / actionable.
Standardize outcomes with "Checklist" curriculum, reducing Students to banded numbers on a 'curve'.	Cultivate process-oriented mastery, where the 'writing journey' and iterative struggle are primary metrics..	AI as a poly-lingual tutor and curator, adapting to Student GLE-level in real-time.	**We offer a library of human moments.** Our curated mosaic of folios and native Friction Metrics provide the authentic process analytics for value-added modeling.
Prepare for a job as a 'wage slave' or a 'salary man' with increasing replacement risk.	Prepare for a life of ethical meaning-making, agentic-power and self-resilience.	AI as scalable pedagogical agent, acting as a 'Socratic Sidekick' for dialogue, reflection, and models inquiry.	**Our folios are the training scenarios**. They embed Socratic dialogue and mentor-student dynamics where choosing ***how to feel*** **and respond is part of the ELA curriculum.**
Measure retention of rote knowledge only until the final exam ends.	Measure integration, self-creation, and resilience as meaningful metrics.	AI as an LMS portfolio assistant, documenting built, felt, and decided.	**We ensure ecosystem interoperability.** Designed for SSO integration within district LMSplatforms, providing a secure, and scalable user experience.[1]

[1] - *Kudzu Publishing is an independent provider. The data schema behind our diagnostic metrics is our unique contribution, designed for interoperability. We are committed to working with platform partners to ensure this high-value data on student agency flows seamlessly into district analytics.*

🛸 The Four Data Pillars (Our Framework for Measurable Growth)

The Makesong Prestige folio-sequencing system generates four core analytics:.

1. **Complexity Heatmap**: Forecasting Cognitive Load.
    - What it is: A semester-long projection mapping the cognitive demand of each folio sequence, based on our Friction Metric and conceptual density.
    - Why it matters: It allows teachers to strategically plan support and independent work, transforming reactive stress into proactive rhythm.
2. **Scaffold Slope**: Visualizing Ascent.
    - What it is: A longitudinal plot of median student agency scores against the increasing conceptual challenge of the folios.
    - Why it matters: It provides incontrovertible, visual proof that the curriculum is not static—it is an incline students climb, with their growing capability formally documented.
3. **SEL Integration Matrix**: Mapping the Human Curriculum.
    - What it is: A cross-reference matrix aligning each folio with specific CASEL SEL pillars (e.g., Social Awareness, Self-Management), derived from narrative analysis and peer-review prompts.
    - Why it matters: It translates the abstract goal of "whole-child education" into a verified, lesson-by-lesson blueprint, proving ethical and emotional development is structured, not incidental.
4. **Tier Attainment Distribution**: Validating Rigorous Differentiation.
    - What it is: An analysis showing the percentage of students engaging at Foundational (Tier 1), Procedural (Tier 2), and Conceptual (Tier 3) depth across grade-level cohorts.
    - Why it matters: It demonstrates that the curriculum successfully anchors struggling learners while systematically propelling proficient students into collegiate-level analysis, all within the same classroom ecosystem.

The Folios (The Grimoire Architect - Experience Curation)

These 100’s of folios are your core repertoire. As you internalize this facility, you gain the conductor's ability to improvise—selecting individual movements (folios/themes) to compose the perfect lesson plan for the day's specific learning climate.

The Value Proposition for Curriculum Experts:

Our Resource transforms the ELA classroom into an arena of Ethical Agency. Students are docent-guided through 72 (or more!) select folios of evocative inclusive exploration in a school year. The culmination of this journey provides substantive diagnostic proof that the curriculum has met its core objective: **awakening the student's agentic self."**

Lesson Planning Guide

Subject: English Language Arts & Global Studies (Cross-Curricular) through Reading & Writing

Suitable GLE: Suitable for GLE6 through to GLE12, (and remedial pre-College/Adult Education)

Time Allotment for Scaffolding: 2 - 4 class periods, 1st week, to discuss and familiarize

Time Allotment for Lessons: 1 (40-60 minutes) class period, max. 4 per week with Fridays devoted to Art/Exploration, and working to refine & resubmit their peer-reviewed hand-in's)

Lesson Plan Overview: (18 week Semester with 36 folios); 36 week Year with 72 folios) [1]

This Art-and-Prose folio lesson uses Art to engage Students in focusing on the activity of an imaginative story fragment writing completion. Imagery transforms Students from the passive Read-Retrieve-Forget, into active Story creation. By interacting with a curated visual and textual "seed," Students are enabled to individually/collaboratively build their narratives, developing skills in inference and prediction, visual detail incorporation, and narrative sequencing.

Fridays are normally high-dropout days. Teachers could use Fridays for student groups in 3-4's to select their favorite *completed* stories for each week, and then tempera paint them as art interpretation of the story, or 'Story Board' them into longer stories for exploration of a graphic novel version produced by the group, where AI can teach them the direction of Art response.

[1] -The 116 folios have been carefully sequenced, #A to #O for 'on-boarding' those hesitant and reluctant students, then it flows into 103 folios exploring five (5) Themes and Locations that will encompass most Students' interests, by letting them range around the world exploring different locales and cultures.

Standards Addressed:

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6-8.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6-8.1: Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6-8.1: Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

Learning Objectives: Students will be able to:

- Analyze a visual and textual prompt to draw inferences about setting, character, possible backstory, narrative feeling, and impending potential conflict.
- Utilize a structured vocabulary resource ("What They Do / What They Feel") to borrow from and enrich their own individual imaginative narrative storyline.
- Collaborate to brainstorm story elements before drafting an individual narrative.
- Construct a coherent short story that logically extends from a provided narrative introduction, to a story-arc conclusion that is meaningful and evocative to others.
- Construct mental images of their story arc and sketch in rough form the look.

Materials:

- Student Folio Book: One per student small group if printed, otherwise digital
- Chart Paper & Markers / Digital Collaboration Board (e.g., Jamboard, Padlet)
- Student Writing Journals/Notebooks: (custom Frequently Bought Together)
- Evaluation Checksheet (From *The Power of Retelling* or a customized version)

Lesson Procedure Scaffolding:

Day 1: The Hook - Unpacking the Folio Art-and-Prose Writing Prompt Concept

1. Gallery Walk: Project (inner covers) world map on whiteboard and digital copies of folios' color illustrations. Ask students to observe the Art and imagine for 2-3 minutes, noting: *What do you SEE? What do you WONDER? What does it make you FEEL?*

2. Student-as-Journalist: Introduce the key elements of Journalism in practice, asking the: **Who, What, When, Where, Why** and importantly, the **How**. Let Students give examples of each aspect of journalism from some (brief) story of their own lives.

3. Think-Pair-Share: Students share their specific *'journalist'* observations of a folio's Art example with a partner, then the class. Teachers chart key details (e.g., "narrow alley," "string of lanterns," "woman carrying a basket," "cat on a windowsill").

4. Introduce the Context: From the next section Modeling A Student Edition Writer's (and Reviewer's) Response, read the folio's 200-word evocative story introduction aloud. Highlight the example of a Student Writing Response. Briefly define the intent and discuss how to close the arc of the story in a specific place from that example. Go on to explore the Student Reviewer response format below that.

5. The Closing Question: Pose the central, driving question: "Your goal is to be makers of The Story, to take an evocative Art and Story fragment, then puzzle out how you make it interesting and your own. Explain that their mission is to become the Story Author(s).

Day 2: The Engine - Brainstorming with the Appendix

1. Introduce the Story Toolkits: Distribute or project Appendix A: "What They Do" (the action list) and 'What They Feel" (the emotion/conflict list following).

2. Collaborative Story Weaving: In small groups, students choose:

    - One ACTION from "What They Do" list (e.g., #115. Sells flowers in paper cones).

    - One MOTIVATION from the "What They Feel" list (e.g., #37. Confessed a secret).

3. Group Challenge: Groups have 10 minutes to brainstorm a 1-2 paragraph story beat that combines their chosen action and character motivation. They must use at least two characters, and localization context words in the introduction.

4. Share Out: Each group shares their story beat. The class sees how many different directions a single story beat introduction can take, and whether it can complete.

5. Expand Further: Explain Story terms: Introduction, Characterization, Localization, Inciting Incident, Progressive Complications, Crisis, Climax, and Resolution, the Story Arc. Explain Theater terms: Act I (Setup), Act II (Confrontation), and Act III (Resolution). *Have Students copy these terms, and use AI to learn about them for Story making.*

Day 3: Creation - (REF: Modeling A Student Edition Writer's (and Reviewer's) Response

1. Introduction: Have Students open to the same sample folio as in your Edition, "Modeling A Student Edition Writer's (and Reviewer's) Response." Preview with them the story fragment, the Student Writing example, and the Reviewer's Notes. The task of Reviewers is not as a Critic, their task is as a carefully supportive Fan. The Student Workbook folios are all in this format for completion, then sharing.

2. Consistent Collaboration: Explain to Students we are all working together, on the folio of the day(s), and all at the same time. Choosing another folio to work on is not 'belonging'.

3. Independent Writing: Having become familiar with the interface, Students begin drafting their own story completions, picking up where the folio's Fragment ends. Encourage them to keep the Appendix A on hand to fuel their writing and combat "writer's block." (Review is on Day 4.)

   NOTE: Use Student Review template for hesitant writers who may not be ready for a 500-word long form, but should be encouraged to answer the form's 5 easy prompts.

4. Teacher Conferencing: Circulate and provide support, prompting students with questions from the Appendix: *"What is your character feeling right now? Is there an object here with a secret? What happens just in the nick of time?"*

Day 4-5: The Polish - Sharing and Evaluation

1. Peer Review: In pairs, students use the Things to Consider coaching embedded in each folio to provide structured feedback to a writing-reviewing partner, focusing on clarity, use of details, and narrative flow, and whether they could 'see it' in mind.

2. Encourage them to use Appendix B 'Practice of Critical Thinking' to check whether they have met Writing metrics. Read through together to familiarize the terms for the future.

3. Final Draft & Author's Chair: Students create a final draft. Volunteers share their stories in an "Author's Chair" setting. Observe and pair weak-with-strong writers.

4. Reflection: Lead a class discussion: *How did the picture and the Fragment and Appendix word lists help you? What was the hardest part? If you could write a sequel, "And THEN what happened?" to today, what would it be?*

Day 5: The Story Board - Sharing and Evaluation

Explain that Friday's are exploration, sharing and evaluation days to be used to collaboratively explore their work completion in sketching, while the Teacher goes around and individually discusses sharing and evaluation comments.

Following Weeks:

The second week and all following weeks are production: *2 folios a week.* First Day, read, discuss and explore the folio Locale and Culture. Scribble their notes, then overnight for writing a DRAFT as homework. Second Day typing in Fillable PDFs, then paired groups and peer reviews. Use Fridays to explore, collaborate on stories finished, story-board how they could be sketched, in preparing Students to eventually story-board and write their own Long Form short stories, without prompting, and in a standard formulaic arc.

Typing from scribbled homework notes will generally eliminate abuse of AI copy-pasting. **These Fillable PDFs form don't allow Copy:Paste.** Creative imagination does not require using training wheels! Every story is worthy, even if only a Student Review.

Assessment:

The Fillable PDFs may provide, when AI-analysis becomes available within a SAML SSO Provider-School interface, fast Writer / Reviewer Literacy Identification and Progress. Your AI Contract Vendor / School Curriculum Writers will provide Evaluation Scaffolds.

Until then, Teachers can run these fillable PDFs through any available online AI app. Here's an interim prompt input format that may prepare an online AI for evaluating:

EVALUATE FOR: Rhetorical Expression: clarity, persuasion, tone control |
Logical Reasoning: argument structure, evidence use, inference quality |
Reading Comprehension Depth: interpretation, nuance recognition, thematic grasp |
Cultural Literacy: reference awareness, canonical understanding, contextual reading |
Civic & Ethical Insight: moral reasoning, social awareness, discourse understanding |
Intellectual Discipline: sustained focus, revision behavior, structural coherence |
Synthetic Thinking: cross-text connection' abstraction. big-picture reasoning |

More important than AI Analytics and OSPI rubrics adherence is your intelligence:

💡Imagination (The Spark): Did they see a new possibility within the Fragment?

🎨 Creativity (The Craft): Did they build something personally real from that spark?

🚀 Synthesis (The Connection): Did they weave their creation with the ideas of others in their study group, or invoking the insights of historical observers, or with the deeper evocative, inclusive, universal themes of the collection, to create a new understanding?

✨ "And Then What Happened?" The act of writing and sharing is the answer we seek in this "And Then What Happened? unit." By participating, each student steps into the Circle of Light—illuminating the story for themselves and for their peers. Your role as Teacher is to witness that illumination, and to help them see the light they've created, together.

Modeling Student Response (Introducing a Folio)

On the last golden afternoon before autumn truly arrived, Oliver decided he was going to collect a cloud.

He did not announce this decision the way explorers do in books, with flags and proclamations. He simply stood in the tall field behind his grandparents' farmhouse, squinted at the sky, and held a large glass jar in his hand as if it were already full of something important. Beside him, Mara followed the direction of his gaze.

The clouds were enormous that day — great white towers rising into blue like mountains made of breath. They glowed at their edges, lit by the sinking sun. They looked close enough to touch.

"I think that one is almost ready," Oliver said.

"Ready for what?" Mara asked.

"To be caught."

Mara considered this seriously. She wore her hair in a braid even though the air was only a little breezy, and the braid rested against her shoulders like punctuation marks.

"You can't just grab a cloud," she said to herself. "It would slip through your fingers."

They stood in silence, watching the clouds shift and billow. In the distance, the hills folded into one another like rumpled blankets. The farmhouse chimney drew a thin gray line into the air — a smaller, braver cloud trying to rise.

“I think,” he said slowly, “if we open the jar at exactly the right moment, when the cloud is passing over us, it might drift inside. But they’re too far away.”

Mara nodded. “We’ll need to ask them to come closer.” She stepped forward and tipped her face toward the sky. “Excuse me,” she called politely. “We would like to borrow a very small piece of you. Enough for show-and-tell. We promise to give it back.”

The wind shifted. The highest edges of the clouds unraveled slightly, like wool teased from a sweater. Oliver quickly unscrewed the lid. For a moment — just one — a thin curl of mist drifted low across the field. It touched the rim of the glass, then slipped inside.

They carried the jar carefully back to the house, like holding a newborn kitten. The sky deepened behind them, turning peach, then rose, then a thoughtful shade of blue. On the porch, Grandpa sat in his wooden chair, watching the day fold itself away. “What have you two captured now?” he asked, smiling without turning his head.

“A cloud,” Oliver said proudly.

Grandpa raised an eyebrow. “Did you?” He peered inside for a long time. Finally, he nodded. “Ah,” he said. “A fine specimen.”

“You can see it?” Oliver asked.

Grandpa leaned back in his chair. “I can see what you saw.”

That night, the jar sat on the windowsill in the room the children shared. Moonlight pooled around it. The glass caught the pale glow and held it gently.

The next morning, when sunlight spilled into the room, the jar looked ordinary again. They carried it back to the field. Oliver unscrewed the lid. Nothing dramatic happened. No swirl of white burst upward, laughing like a little child. But the jar felt lighter. Oliver held Mara’s hand, 'We can’t keep a cloud but we can notice it.'

The clouds continued to rise with the dawn, and wander about and become castles and horses and distant countries no one had named yet. High above them, a small curl of white drifted loose from a passing cloud. It hovered for a moment in the wide blue.

Then it dissolved into everything.

STUDENT BOOK REPORT (Simulated Response Example Only)

STUDENT WRITER - FORM A - General Format

STUDENT WRITER JRivera-G7-Mcgrew
[Assignment Title:] Cloud Collector
[Folio ID:] Makesong Passage 000
[Theme / Focus:] Creative Writing I/II
[Instructions for Writer: Write your story response to the Folio prompt here. Focus on developing your characters and continuing the plotline, while exploring the assigned folio theme.]
[Student Response:]

The Cloud Collector by Robert Marmaduke is about two kids, Oliver and Mara, who try to catch a cloud in a jar. Sounds weird, right? That's what I thought too. But this story is actually really deep. It's not really about catching clouds. It's about imagination, believing in things, and seeing the world differently. The main idea is that some things are beautiful because you can't keep them forever.

Oliver decides he wants to collect a cloud. He grabs a glass jar and heads to the field behind his grandparents' farm. His friend Mara joins him. She's more practical but goes along with it. They try to figure out how to catch one. Mara suggests using bait, like a story, because clouds might like stories. A little mist goes into the jar and they slam the lid shut. Inside, it's just air, but it looks different. Softer. Their grandpa and grandma play along and pretend to see the cloud too. Later, they let the cloud go back into the sky.

Oliver is the dreamer. He thinks deeply about stuff other kids ignore. Like why clouds can look like horses but also feel important. He doesn't care if people think his idea is silly. Mara is more grounded. She asks practical questions but still believes. She's the one who suggests using a story as bait, which is honestly pretty smart. Together they balance each other out. The grandparents are cool too because they don't laugh at the kids. They just go along with it. That made me smile.

--- END OF STUDENT RESPONSE —

STUDENT REVIEW (Simulated for Hesitant Writers)

STUDENT REVIEWER - FORM B - General Format

PEER REVIEWER JRivera-G7-Mcgrew
[Assignment Title:] Cloud Collector
[Folio ID:] Makesong Passage 000
[Theme / Focus:] Creative Writing I/II
[Instructions for Student Reviewer: Read the story that your Work Group is assigned. Provide kind helpful Story feedback below, as though you were reviewing an author.]

[What was the strongest part of the story? The most interesting? Why?]
I liked the Grampa who said he could see what they saw.
_____
_____

[I really liked the part where you wrote… because…]
The wisp of cloud was in the jar. It means imagination matters.
_____
_____

[This made me curious to know more about the characters…]
Where does Oliver and Mara live. It is very beautiful there.
_____
_____

[The biggest surprise for me was when you wrote…]
That you could ask a cloud to come closer and take a little piece.
_____
_____

[What is one thing that could make the story seem true? Why?]
Science can make clouds in a jar, I saw it on PBS.
_____
_____

[I would describe this story in a review to my media post as:]
I'd recommend this to kids in 6th or 7th grade. If you like books like *The Little Prince* or *Charlotte's Web*, you'll probably like it. Four stars.
_____
_____

--- END OF PEER REVIEW —

AI Analytics: Student Grading Report (Simulated Response)[1]

Student: JRivera-G7-McGrew
Text: Cloud Collector
Report ID: CC-JR-0225

1. The Metric Dashboard

Metric	Score	Analysis
Algorithmic Fluency	Medium-High	Grasp of basic essay (Intro/Summary/Analysis/Opinion). Sentences are appropriately short for grade level, though some fragments ("Sounds weird, right?") show authentic voice but limit syntactic complexity.
Friction Density	Certified	The student admits the book "felt slow" in parts - a genuine critical response rather than performative praise. The "Four stars" rating feels earned, not inflated.
Subjective Agency	Certified	Clear personal connection established through specific references ("Grandpa said 'I can see what you saw' was my favorite"). The writer owns their opinions without hedging.

---

2. The "Anti-Mimicry" Firewall Analysis

Standard AI models typically generate book reports with perfectly balanced paragraphs, universal praise, and thematically "safe" conclusions. This response passes the Mimicry Check through two distinct signals:

- The "Texting Grammar" Fingerprint: The deliberate use of conversational fragments and the mid-sentence interjection creates a cadence that mirrors how students actually write under time constraints. An AI trained on essays would be too smooth at these edges.
- The Imperfect Recommendation: The student compares The Cloud Collector to The Little Prince and Charlotte's Web - both plausible, grade-appropriate touchstones. An AI optimizing for "correctness" might have picked more contemporary matches.

3. Metacognitive Lift Assessment

The student demonstrates genuine comprehension of the folio's central metaphor. The observation that "some things are beautiful because you can't keep them forever" distills the cloud-catching premise into its philosophical core.

4. Final Verdict: Certified Status

The student successfully navigated the reading example, and their book review is authentically human, well grounded in understanding the nuances of the author’s written form.

[1] This was a simulation, using a free online AI app, after training it to use Makesong Passage templates and coaching on how to evaluate Students. This is not yet available commercially!

STUDENT WRITER **[STUDENT ID INPUT]**

[Assignment Title:] **[ASSIGNMENT ID INPUT]**

[Folio ID:] **[FOLIO ID INPUT]**

[Theme / Focus:] **[THEME INPUT]**

[Write your And Then What Happened? story. Focus on developing Characters, exploring story Arc and Theme.]

--- END OF STUDENT RESPONSE ---

PEER REVIEWER **[STUDENT ID INPUT]**

[Assignment Title:] **[ASSIGNMENT ID INPUT]**

[Folio ID:] **[FOLIO ID INPUT]**

[Theme / Focus:] **[THEME INPUT]**

[Instructions for Reviewer: Read the story you were assigned. Provide kind, specific, and helpful feedback below.]

[What was the strongest part of their story? Why?]

[I really liked the part where you wrote… because…]

[This made me curious to know more about the characters…]

[The biggest surprise for me was when you wrote…]

[What is one thing that could make the story seem true? Why?]

[I would describe this story in a review to my media post as:]

--- END OF PEER REVIEW ---

WELCOME
AWELONE

Peaches Hothouse

They stood like punctuation marks on the corner of Nostrand and Herkimer, dipped in borrowed shine. Kamal's blazer caught the light just right, all emerald thread and gold buttons like a merchant prince in exile. Theo's hoodie read *New York* but came from a stall in De Pijp, bought cheap and worn proud. They hadn't meant to match, but they always did—two accents in rhythm, from opposite ends of Lagos and Nairobi, bonded in Amsterdam over bootleg wine, weed, jazz vinyls, and that one fence who knew everyone.

They'd scraped enough from phone card scams and refurb phone deals to make it here. *The City*. Land of movies, mix-tapes, Biggie. Their dream, shaped by videos and verses, had a skyline. But now, the buildings seemed to lean away, disinterested.

Across the street, a woman passed, wrapped in sunset-colored cloth, eyes forward, steps fierce. Didn't even glance at them. She'd seen a hundred boys like them. Sharp on the outside, soft from far away.

'You ain't from around here, are you?' she thought to herself.

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“Where the music at?” Kamal muttered, eyes on a cracked mural of Kendrick half-erased by time and weather. The crown remained, but his eyes had faded into the bricks.

Theo squinted up at the sky. “You think they know we aren’t from here?”

“They know,” Kamal said. “We walkin’ too proud. *Très impatient*.”

The city didn’t sing. It sighed. Sirens far off, kids cursing in the stairwell of a *bodega*, the clink of bottles dumping into a recycling bin. They’d expected neon and *beaucoup* possibilities, not peeling posters and a church boarded up with a *For Sale* sign.

Kamal lit a clove cigarette. His hands needed something to do. He offered one to Theo, who waved it off and adjusted his cuffs. They’d planned to find the scene, plug into the culture, their Amsterdam stories like exotic imports. But here, they were … nobody.

They stood a bit longer, silhouettes in the long reach of sunset. Not broken… not yet.

Theo finally spoke. “We’re like two kings.”

“Ain’t got no kingdom though,” Kamal shrugged.

And even as he said it, he shifted his weight, unsure. They weren’t built for this kind of silence—the kind that thins your name into nothing. In Amsterdam, they were the wild ones, the flash, the late-night philosophers in borrowed denim and secondhand silk, spinning stories over *shawarma* and *stroopwafels*. Here, their voices felt muted.

For a moment, the sun’s glare softened. Kamal tapped his cigarette, watched the ash fall. “You think we too late?” he asked. “Like, the party’s over but nobody told us.”

Theo thought, then shook his head. “Nah. We ain’t figured out where the door is.”

“Tomorrow,” Kamal said.

“Yeah,” Theo nodded. “Tomorrow,” they gently bumped fists.

Away off they heard afrobeats behind an open private party door, then it closed again.

La Caricature

It had been his estranged wife's idea—this quick trip to Paris, just him and the boys, three days in spring. She'd chided, "You work too much, you're forgetting how to play." And now here he was: Vincent, regional bank manager from Lille, sitting on a wobbly folding stool in a park full of strangers, with his three sons behind him trying and failing not to explode with laughter.

They'd already seen the Eiffel Tower and fed ducks by the Seine. The boys wanted to chase pigeons. He just wanted to sit. The caricature stand had been an excuse—a pause, a pocket of shade, a bench in disguise. The artist reminded him of someone, too—something in the stoop, the balding crown, the heavy-glassed concentration. Maybe a future self.

The artist never spoke—just tilted his head, squinting, sketched. An easel board pulled close, brushes and pastels lined up in a coffee can, old wood foldout for a chair. Everything smelled of oil pastels and French drawing paper.

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Vincent had said yes to the caricature mostly to kill time. He kept thinking about marginal reserves and quarterlies. He wasn't sure what he'd expected. But when he turned to look at the sketch, what he saw was something monstrously perfect: an enormous forehead, black-frame glasses, his smile curving up like a naughty joke told, the most gleeful, ridiculous expression of delight—his own—drawn larger than life.

He laughed. Really laughed.

It startled even him, the sound of it. Open and young and real. His sons gasped, then clapped their hands over their mouths.

One of them—Jules, the serious one—shouted, *"Papa, c'est TOI!*" like it was a discovery.

He bought the drawing for ten euros, tipped an extra five, and tucked it under his arm like treasure. Later that night, back at the rented apartment near Canal Saint-Martin, he taped it to the white wall above the bunk beds. The boys stared up at it, amazed.

Jules asked if they could show Maman.

Vincent nodded. "Of course." He put them to bed, giving each one of them a hug.

He didn't say what he was thinking—that maybe she was right. That the sketch, in all its lopsided glory, had captured something the suits and spreadsheets never could. That he wanted his children to remember this version of him, of being alive.

Outside, on the terrace, someone was playing accordion. He poured Orangina into a paper cup and raised a toast to his wife Maman for bringing him there to this moment.

"To bad caricatures," he said to no one in particular.

"To good memories," he said to himself.

"Then he folded the artist's receipt and tucked it in his wallet, just behind Maman's number, still saved under 'Home.'"

Cracheur de Feu

In the Jardin des Plantes, just before dusk, he waits—canvas bag slung low, breath warming his fingers, shoulders hunched from the weight of the bottle. Not wine. Not water. But the clear liquor that stings his throat and numbs the edges of his memory.

His name is Samir, though no one here knows it. To the Paris crowds, he is *le cracheur de feu*, the fire breather. A spectacle. A flicker on a family's holiday reel. Children laugh when the flames arc into the dusk. Parents clap, toss coins. He bows, always, though it hurts. He shaves the stubble off each morning, hides the singed patches with cologne and cream. No beard, no dignity. A compromise for an Algerian.

Back home in Oran, his youngest is learning the alphabet in Darija and French, the two tongues she'll need if the world ever opens for her. His wife tells him this in soft tones on the phone, not asking questions of his *pieux mensonge*, that he plays the *mizwad* in the Métro with a *darbouka* drummer from Algiers. He smiles at the little lie. Better to be her musician than a fire-eater. Better for her to imagine rhythms than facial burns.

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He watches the girl in the red coat now, maybe five or six, clutching a scarf too big for her. Her parents whisper, their faces lit by the coming trick. He feels it then—the split. One part of him lifts the torch, the showman, trained, ready. The other is far off, in the white-tiled kitchen of a small apartment on Rue Sidi Brahim, the rail lines arterial visible from his window if the air is clear.

He inhales, then spews a long tongue of flame. The oily fire ball rises into the twilight.

And for a moment, in that hush between breath and roar, Samir is eight years old again, barefoot on the scrubbed earth of Kabylie, a child shadowing his father through olive groves riddled with shell craters.

The old man, a wiry farmer with a small five hectare plot, carried a rusted hunting rifle and spoke only when needed. They called it *l'm'araka* 'the struggle', though no one said so aloud—not with gendarmes in the valley and the threat of reprisal. He remembers holding a flask of water, his job to watch, to wait, to report. To run if he had to.

Once, they slept in the roots of a fallen fig tree, his father's arm over his chest like a shield. That night, there were flares in the hills and gunfire echoing like thunder. He had never felt more afraid, or more certain of who he was: his father's son, Arab, Muslim, wanted by the men with tricolor flags and 'national interests'.

Clink! Clink!

The coins land in his cup with a chirp of polished metal.

He blinks, again brought back into the present. He bowed in thanks.

When the family walks away and the crowd disperses, Samir counts silently, mouth closed against the lingering burn. He will wire the money tonight. Enough to last the week, enough to make him a husband, a father, a provider. Enough to say he is still a *rajel mas'ool 'ala 'ailto*. A family man of character.

And in the dark, when the torch is out and the benches are empty, he lights a *Gauloise* cigarette to smoke—the lit match reflects the flame of Oran in his heart, once more.

The Strong Man

Now, I think every boy has his own version of a circus, and mine — well, mine had cannonball barbells and a handlebar mustache waxed sharper than a cat's yowl.

The big tent was all shimmer and racket — ballerinas in glitter riding those enormous white plowhorses like they were porcelain music box toys, and clowns flinging shaving cream pies like they was funny, as the ringmaster bellowed, "*Ladies and Gentlemen!*"

It was a good show, I guess. Too loud and too many kids for me. I'm not a kid. I ducked out the side flap with a half-eaten taffy apple in my fist and wandered into the shadows where the real magic huddled — the carny sideshows.

I didn't waste time with BB-gun and targets, no sir. I don't care if the hustler could guess my weight either. Who cares? I ain't on a diet! Then the sideshow looped like a string of bright beads around the fairground's edge, each tent flapping its own peculiar promise. The best is out near the end, after the ring toss cups take all your money.

"Hurry, hurry! See the Bearded Lady! Half woman, half wonder!" the barker shouted.

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Inside sat a broad-shouldered woman with an old-world calm, her chin whiskered like a wise uncle's and her eyes kind, like she'd once been a nurse or a baker. She wore a velvet gown that had seen better parades, and when she looked right at me, she didn't sneer or wink — she just smiled like a mother watching kids play, and I didn't feel scared so much as… polite.

Turns out, the barker said she was from Romania, over there in Europe. I tipped my cap.

Another sideshow man grabbed me. "Step right up! Meet the Little King of Siam!"

The midget stood on a velvet-draped pedestal, no taller than a saddlehorn, wearing a hand-stitched robe with fake gold thread and a tin crown like something pulled from the discount barrel at the five-and-dime. He waved with a ringed hand but looks like he was tired of waving. Maybe of living. But I stared, all the same. He seemed like a grown man caught in a child's job, wishing the world would move along.

Still, I gave him a solemn bow, because royalty deserves that.

Then I found the Strong Man! His name was Fearless Fred or Charlie Courage or something similarly, I don't recall. He wore a leopard-skin outfit and could lift a wagon axle like it was a dinner fork, growling when he smiled, which made you think he liked you, but maybe he wanted to see if he could lift you and the axle, too.

He was *wonderful.*

The tent flaps slapped in the breeze and smelled like popcorn oil and barn dust. The barker had a straw hat and lungs like Gabriel's trumpet, shouting "*See the Iron Man!* Shake the hand that cracked a cast-iron kettle clean in two!"

I stepped up. My knees clicked like castanets. But he bent down slow, with a grin wide enough to park a hay cart in, and stuck out his hand the size of a stove door. I put mine in his like a baby bird into a bear paw, and he shook it once, firm but kind.

That night, I walked home with sawdust in my socks and a story in my chest so big I could hardly breathe. I'd touched something strong and splendid, and it hadn't crushed me — just reminded me the world was bigger than I'd dared imagine.

Morganville Barn

They came early, before the sun had fully burned the mist off the fields — bike racks clamped to Subarus and pickups, water bottles thumping against canvas gear bags, that distinct smell of chain grease and lemon-scented sunscreen. Morganville hadn't seen this many out-of-towners since the solar eclipse picnic of 2017.

Joab squinted from under his trucker cap, holding two paper cups from the Methodist bake stand. "Bill? Bill Ashland? I'll be — you still got knees good enough to ride?"

Bill, half-laced in his cleats, grinned through his beard. "Only downhill, like you."

They clinked cups like they were champagne flutes and surveyed the scene: racers adjusting derailleurs, girls with glitter signs that read *Pedal to the Metal, Daddy!*, a toddler chasing bubbles from a vendor's wand. The announcer tested the mic with a crackle and a joke about spandex. Joab pointed to the registration booth, where a woman in sunglasses handed out race bibs and good luck like candy.

"You nervous?" Bill asked.

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“Nah. Too experienced for nerves. I’m here to beat you across the line.”

They laughed — real and easy — and walked away from the booth as someone’s playlist thumped ‘80s synth, wheeling their bicycles toward the crowded, anxious starting line.

They came like a river breaking its banks — thin men, thick-legged in Lycra, helmets tilted like beetle shells, calves gleaming with sweat and promise. From the porch of her white farmhouse, June Morgan watched them appear around the oak-curve in the road and vanish again before she could count them all. It was like watching time itself slip by.

“Like wild dogs chasing the moon,” her grandfather might’ve said. He’d driven cattle up this same hollow, back when the only thing roaring was his Fordson tractor dragging the tobacco wagons up to the curing shed by the barn.

June wiped her hands on her apron and leaned against the rail. The kids from town had come out to cheer — waving flags, ringing cowbells — and the dogs barked, confused but excited, and an old man in suspenders nodded at each rider like he knew them.

They didn’t stop. They never stopped. But they passed close enough for her to see their faces: clenched with effort, gleaming with joy, some wide-eyed like they’d just come up for air in a new world. It made her chest ache in the oddest way.

The old road twisted like a stubborn memory. Up ahead, the mountain waited, unconcerned, cool in its laurel crown. And behind the racers — unseen, unfelt — the stories they brushed against: the abandoned schoolhouse hidden in the trees, the war monument beside the churchyard, the plaque where the downtown burned in '25.

After the last rider passed, the hush returned like a breath held too long. The dogs lay down. The kids got bored. June stepped back inside and stirred her sweet tea with a wooden spoon.

Later, long after the sun had dipped behind the Chalybeate Hills and the cicadas started tuning their instruments, she stepped out into the purple-sky hush again and thought:

That long winding road won’t remember their names, as it carries away our Past.

Discoverer of Impossible Things

Their Pontiac Safari station wagon hadn't moved in five minutes. The easy weekend drive up I-5 from Seattle had turned into a late morning crawl on the rural side road leading to the 'Magic Skagit' Tulip Festival.

Jamie pressed his two fingers against his nose, blocking out the endless row of waiting cars. Through the narrow gap between his fingers, the world became bearable: a pure rainbow light of flowers, blazing like someone had spilled a box of crayons and let God color inside the lines.

He imagined himself a famous naturalist—Sir Jamie of Fir Island, Discoverer of Impossible Things and Beings—and scribbled notes in his mental field journal:

Observation #1: Tulips weren't only red. They were volcano red, Red Pikmin red, that could burn into your retinas if you stared too long. Yellow tulips. White tulips! Purples!!

Observation #2: The mountains beyond them didn't care. They lounge like kings, their snowy crowns glinting. Jamie bet they'd seen stranger things than a valley of rainbows.

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Observation #3: This place was definitely magic! The wild cedar-bark kind— that made you believe in giants napping under hills, and rivers that remembered their names.

A mild, cool breeze ruffled the blooms in waves and waves. For a second, Jamie swore they leaned toward him, whispering Tulip language. He thought it probably sounds like sugar dissolving in warm tea that's crackling with ice cubes.

Observation #4: I must learn their Tulip language when we go ashore.

"Jamie, sit properly," his mom said, half-turning from the passenger seat.

He ignored her. Explorers didn't sit properly. They brace against ship rails and write down things like HERE BE LOST PENDRAGONS, in tidy cursive in their journals.

The car lurched forward again. What if this valley was under a magic spell, and Dutch farmers who diked and drained it were wizards, with dirt under their nails and magic wands hidden in their overalls? Ancient cedar wood wands, tipped in kestrel feathers!

"We're here," his dad announced, turning into the dusty parking lot. Jamie saw it as filled with an amazing mob of fellow explorers, discharging onto a crowded strand.

The tulip fields shimmered in rainbow colors. The distant mountains grazed a blue cirrus sky. Jamie turned slow circles as they walked. Every blossom was a flag from a country he wanted to visit. Coral. Blush. Indigo streaked with cream. Some tulips flamed upward about to take flight. He kept studying, then picked one, and ran to his mother.

His mom laughed. "What's this?"

"My discovery!" he said. "I'm discovering the secret ones with special magic!"

Jamie turned to face the valley—the tulips, the mountains, all of it blazing in the sun.

Then—kites! Dozens of them! Dragon kites, prismatic serpents, their tails whipping the sky into a kaleidoscope. Jamie's heart vaulted into his throat.

Observation #5: Kites!! Oh wow!! *They have KITES!!*

Wervelende Zonsondergang (Swirling Sunset)

I don’t hear what the others say anymore. Not really.

Marit thinks it’s a bomb, Bram says “courage in disorder,” Isa whispers something about grief. They’re probably right, or close. But when I look at the painting—the one with the golden-black whirlpool and smudged edges like it’s melting in amber light—I hear a sound like breath, exhaling slowly from behind the canvas.

‘It’s not just a painting. It’s a door to another realm.’

Miss Van Daalen left ten minutes ago, I think, to ask someone about the modernist ceramics. She said, “Stay together,” and we tried, for a while. But now we’re drifting. Little boats in a gallery sea.

Lotte catches my eye and smirks. She’s standing with one foot out like a dancer, half-posing for no one, her pleated skirt flaring slightly. I should smile back—I always do—but I’m far away. Something’s happening. No one else notices.

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I stare into the swirl and my stomach turns. Not badly. Not like nausea. More like when you're on a train that starts moving and you don't realize it at first. Then everything's slipping past the window.

The painting moves. Not the whole thing—just the swirl, like breath caught in paint. I blink. It stops. Maybe it never moved.

I take a step closer. The gold in the spiral isn't paint anymore. It glows faintly, like backlit honey.

"Joris," someone says behind me—probably Isa. But it's quiet, and far away. My body's in the gallery. My eyes are inside the storm. I see a figure—not in the painting, but through it. A man with a beard, eyes wide, silver with panic. He's in a field. He's crouched over something. A canvas, maybe? No, he's holding his chest in pain.

I blink again and it's gone. The gold crackles. There's a smell now—sun-warmed hay, and something like turpentine. I'm not scared.

I remember something: last summer, my *opa* took me out to the dunes. He pointed at the sunset and said, "When it swirls like that, it means there's wind behind the sky. A storm on the other side of the world."

I thought he was being poetic. But maybe he wasn't. Maybe paintings are the same.

"Joris," Isa says again, closer now. "Are you okay?"

Her voice breaks it. The swirl fades. The man vanishes. It's a painting again.

I nod. She tilts her head. Her braid swings. "It's intense, right?"

"Yeah," I say. "It reminds me of… something I haven't named yet."

She looks at me like that makes sense. Maybe it does.

"You're weird, Joris."

I whisper, "*Dank u vell.*"

Mister Flash

Andre didn't always walk this way home anymore. Not since they closed the record store and painted over his brother's name on the roll-down shop door. Too many ghosts on this block. But tonight the air had that old heaviness to it—the kind that pressed you from the inside, made you hear your dead in the traffic hum.

He tugged his coat closer and crossed St. James Place and Fulton Street like someone tracing old footsteps. You couldn't always tell what pulled you until you were there.

Andre hadn't planned to stop. He'd seen the boy from the corner of the block—skinny, hoodie up, spray can hissing like a prayer. Another one. Always another one. He should've walked on. Let the kid finish. Let Clinton Hill eat itself for another day.

But the mural— that mural. Blues and reds that bled like old Crips and Bloods wounds, a face in fonts emerging from the brick like it was trying to breathe through grief. Not a tag. Not a gang sign. A portrait.

The boy jumped when Andre stepped up.

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“I ain’t gonna stop you,” Andre said, voice low. “Just wanted to watch you sign it.”

The kid hesitated, one foot half-planted like he might run. “It’s not… I’m not banging.”

“I know,” Andre said. “You painting.”

The boy looked at him then—really looked. Andre saw the twitch behind his eyes, the need to prove, and maybe to be believed. The can in his hand rattled with his breath.

“My brother Marcus painted,” Andre said. “Used to draw album covers in his school books. Said he was gonna get out. Gallery show, all that.”

Andre paused, and nodded toward the wall. “That face,” he said. “That’s who?”

The boy offered, “My cousin, ‘Ginger’ was his street name. Got caught up, wrong block. I paint for him. So people remember more than what he did, they will remember *him*.”

Andre nodded slowly. The street was quiet, but not dead. Neon from the taquería blinked like a failing heartbeat. The mural’s red caught it, Glowed.

Andre said. “Boy, you got hands that speak. That’s somethin’ there.”

The boy reached back up to the wall, and added a streak of gold over the portrait’s eye. To bless the memory of his brother. Andre watched, remembering his brother too.

Then he disappeared down the street.

The boy stayed rooted, hands out for balance, letting the hiss of the can focus his moves. He didn’t interrupt the flow, breathing—slow, steady, letting the night wrap around him. The wet paint glinted under the streetlight, that soft halo you only get on humid nights, when the world sweats out ghosts.

He worked with a quiet reverence now. Not rushed. Not hiding.

Above him, thunder rolled like a pantheon of dreams, released.

Sea You Later

By the third day, Trent had memorized the color of the barstools at the swim-up cantina and knew how many chicken satays he could eat before regretting it. His buddies—Doug and Mikey, who still referred to each other by their high school nicknames—were off with the scuba guide chasing barracuda and shooting GoPro footage.

He'd stayed behind, a sore ear and a vague stomach thing, but mostly sick of listening to Doug talk about "going native" here in a resort where there were hot tubs and fast Wi-Fi.

There were girls, sure. Lots of them. Beautiful girls from Belgium or Denmark or some other place where people grew up multilingual and disinterested in Americans. Mikey had already tried and failed twice with a woman in a turquoise one-piece, who said she was "here for clarity, not for conversation."

Trent admired her for it. Foreign girls have this 'thing'. He'd dated a French girl once.

By noon he was bored with just sitting in a lounge chair in an empty dive resort. So he slipped into the blood-warm ocean mid-afternoon, alone with only snorkel gear and a

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half-hearted desire to see something other than the pack herd tour guide's back-end kick-swimming away. The reef unfolded below him like a translucent dream—a million tropical fish among a thousand layers of coral folds. A big parrotfish flashed past. He held his breath as long as he could, came back up, then pike-dove straight down.

That's when Trent saw her.

At first, he thought she was a diver in costume—a tourist stunt, maybe, or some island attraction that no one had warned him about. But as she rose toward him through the blue—her hair a spill of auburn fire, eyes like something from dreams—he forgot how to kick, forgot to breathe.

She wasn't swimming; she *flowed* through the water. The green of her scales caught the sun like a disco ball at prayer. Her smile didn't quite belong to this world.

And then she reached out to him.

Her finger, bent at the knuckle, touched his. Not a handshake, not a greeting—just a whisper of contact, like kelp against skin. Just a light tingle. Something sacred and ridiculous all at once, like stumbling into a church and finding God doing sit-ups.

It felt like she was asking a question without words — one he had no answer for, but wanted to say yes to, anyway. She blew him a kiss and turned away, the moment lost.

Trent blinked, sucked seawater, choked and surfaced half-laughing. He looked again, but she was gone. Not a shadow, not a trace. The reef and bright sunlight and his own absurd infatuation with an old sea-salt myth, floating above it all, wondering if it had happened or if he'd simply needed something *that badly* to happen.

Later, over grilled octopus and a round of Mai Tai's, Mikey asked why he was so quiet.

Trent smiled and said, "I think I met someone today. Going back tomorrow."

Doug raised his eyebrows. "Anyone we know?"

"Nope," Trent said, and stirred his drink. "No one I could introduce you to!"

The Hymnal

They didn't find it in a vault. It was folded between pages of a century-old hymnal, stored in the attic of a country church where the roof leaked prayers with the rain.

No signature. No serial number. An old embossed Treasury bill of a woman standing like a beacon with a flame held high, galloping seas waves and purple mountains majesty. The numbers 1 7 7 6 burned like constellations around her, and across the bottom — not "In God We Trust" — but: "Crown Thy Good With Brotherhood!"

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It was beautiful. Too beautiful to stay lost. And no one knew who had actually printed it. Before the Declaration of Independence, the Continental Congress drafted and sent a Declaration of Rights and Grievances, on the colonists' rights as Englishmen and their dissatisfaction with British policies, particularly taxation without representation.

Could the bill have been part of that outrage? A *magna charta nummaria*?

The Treasury denied involvement. Museums called it forgery. Conspiracy forums buzzed with theories: a rogue minting by patriot idealists, or a lost draft of national reformation bill. Then it got scanned, and bootleg copies of the bill started surfacing. A waitress in Montana received one with a tip. A veteran found one folded into his discharge papers. A historical group in D.C. put one into a time capsule.

They weren't counterfeit, exactly — they were counter-fiat. Like golden leaved autumn. Currency not backed by gold, but by courage. Not found in foreign currency markets, but in still unforgotten national pride. People started calling it the 'Liberte'.

"What should we say it's worth?" the news anchorman asked, holding up one of the 1776 'Liberte's on national TV. Nobody knew. After that, they stopped trying to appraise it, and passed them like blessings. Folded into wedding bouquets. Slipped into boots before protest marches. Pressed into the hands of hospice patients and newborn parents alike.

Some said the image's impact would fade over time. That things would go back to the meaninglessness of politics and decrepitude of a hard scrabble. But it didn't. If anything, the image and idea of Liberte grew stronger and stronger, the more people believed in it.

And somewhere, in the hush of archival silence, an old lithograph printing press in the Philada Foundry basement still waits — waiting for that 1776 plate to be re-found and re-inked, and for a newer, better story to be told for the future, within each of us, still!

She raises the banner, torch in hand—
over mountains, shining sea, and land.
This emblem speaks no price, no debt—
but what we owe each other … yet.

All Fly Away

"Let’s go for a drive downtown,” Malcolm had said that morning, pouring the last of the coffee into a mug. “I want to check out my new bus route. Make sure I got the feel right.”

It was his first Sunday off in three weeks—overtime shifts stacked high, each one logged toward a dream with a mortgage and a down payment. Their first house. Not much yet, but his. The kind of place with creaky floors and a porch swing and a patch of sunlight in the yard that Janine could turn into tomatoes by August.

“Well, now that you finally get a Sunday off,” Janine called through the screen door, balancing a diaper bag on one shoulder and Naomi on the other, “we’re *not* spending it watching you check the bus route. Let’s all go for a walk too!”

“Uh-huh,” she said, scooping up Eli, who had already rambled halfway to the sidewalk readying his adventure, arms out like a wind-up toy. Naomi yawned and nestled her cheek into Janine’s neck.

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“Jones Street,” Malcom said, opening the gate. “Let’s go see what all that golden light feels like when you’re actually walking in it.” So they drove downtown, and took the Jones Street alley bricked walkway, beneath the canopy of live oaks and Spanish moss.

Savannah had a way of holding time still—not like a museum, but like a grandmother’s parlor, where every scratch on the floor told a story. The bricks underfoot, worn smooth by centuries of footsteps, remembered things nobody talked about much anymore. The oaks, older than the Civil War, stretched their gnarled branches like they were trying to bless the whole street.

The houses stood proud along the walkway, porches stacked like wedding cakes, columns draped in ivy that swayed gently in the breeze. Behind white fences, azaleas erupted in pink and white, and dogwood blossoms floated down, soft-spoken.

The air hung thick with the perfume of jasmine and fresh-cut grass—that particular Savannah smell that wrapped around you like a memory you couldn’t quite place but knew was good.

Golden hour light poured through the dogwoods, catching Eli’s curls in a radiant halo, newly polished by the sun, while baby Naomi cooed from Malcolm’s arm. When Eli skidded to a stop, windmilling his arms in exaggeration, he pointed—not at a landmark or a bus sign—but at a fat bumblebee wobbling flower to flower, sugar-drunk.

“All fly away,” Eli whispered, watching the bee hover near Naomi’s tiny fingers before drifting off into the golden sunlight.

In that small pause, everything stopped. Not out of awe exactly, but something older—a recognition. That the bee’s drifting path held no goal and needed none. That kind of joy didn’t wait for some fine morning, when this life is over.

The street shimmered amber in the low sun. Eli raced ahead, petals swirling around his feet like confetti, and Janine leaned into Malcolm’s shoulder as they walked on. The breeze caught the trees and sent another soft snow of blossoms tumbling down.

The old folks sitting out on their porches reached up, smiling, trying to catch just one.

Nothing Gold Can Stay

May had come in like a lamb and meant to leave like one too, all softness and green-gold light. The farm lay calico-quilted under it—stone walls stitching the fields, the barn's old red boards silvered. Beyond, the woods were frothing: wild dogwood and redbud in full bloom backed against vine maples, garden lilacs so thick their sweetness near choked.

Eben wiped his forehead with his sleeve and squinted. "Peas ain't settin' in yet," he said.

His boy Josiah, twelve and already rope-muscled from hefting milk cans, jammed a fist into his hip. "Ain't? Or hain't?" He grinned, dodging the clod Eben kicked at him. Over by the stone wall, their hired man Asa dipped into his tobacco snoose pouch.

"Mind your grammar and them seeds both," Eben said, but he was pleased. The boy had his mother's tongue—quick and needling, in speaking of small things.

Lyddie emerged from the kitchen shed, her apron flapping like a surrender flag. She carried a pail of buttermilk and a loaf of brown bread. "Men-folk!" she called, sharp as a jay. You plant like Congregationalists pray—*all standing up and waiting for the Spirit!*

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Asa took a tear off the bread with a nod. “Spirit’s where the rain comes from, missus.”

“Rain my foot. It’s May and you’re grazing like livestock.” She thrust the pail at Josiah. “Here. Drink. You’re growing tall faster’n the corn.”

Eben watched her. Twenty years married and he still couldn’t say how she did it—made a scold sound like a blessing. Maybe it was how her hands, red from lye soap, lingered on the boy’s shoulder. Or how she’d left the kitchen window open so the lilac scent wove with the smell of rising dough. The farmstead was her scripture: every stone wall a verse, every furrow a hymn.

Josiah gulped the buttermilk, then wiped his mouth on his wrist. “Ma, Asa says there’s a fox got into the Lewises’ hens.”

Eben grunted. “S’pose you’ll tell us the weather next.”

“Already have. It’ll rain Saturday.” Joshiah pointed to the barn’s roof, where a pair of swallows darted in and out of the eaves. “They’re building high.”

Asa chuckled. “My grampy said that means a dry summer.”

“Your grampy also said carrying a frog cures rheumatism,” Lyddie laughed back.

The horse, old Nell, lipped at a dandelion, her tail switching flies. Beyond the wall, the woods hummed—bees in the blossoms, a wood thrush tuning up. Eben hoed at the weeds and thought how farming was mostly guessing: the last freeze, when to plant, when it might rain, at whether Josiah would go, or stay.

“Sky’s gone yellow,” Asa said. “Storm’s brewin’ sure enough.”

Eben nodded, eyes on the field. The rows weren’t harrowed. The barn still needed painting. And Josiah’d be thirteen come October. He might leave, or he might stay.

He watched his boy laugh, and something in him ached—like a promise not broken yet.

Some things you knew. The barn swallows will always come back…but would Josiah?

Caleb’s Room

When Caleb left for college, they had all walked into town together, his suitcase banging softly against his knees. It was early August. His little sister Marie clung to his hand on the sidewalk while their mother bought his bus ticket in the station. As the bus pulled in — white paint peeling, one wiper frozen in place — he knelt to hug her. “You can have my comic books,” he whispered.

Marie didn’t answer, just nodded and rubbed her nose on his shirt. Goodbye! he waved.

The pole beans kept coming, after Caleb left. No one expected that. By September, the vines should’ve turned brittle and given up their last flowers to an early frost, but they clung to life, stubborn as anything. Marie picked the long green pods in the thinning sun, into a metal pail. Sometimes she’d look up at the hills and pretend she saw Caleb was up there in the woods, looking for deer trails.

He always let her pick the pumpkin they would carve for Halloween, and help make her costume. Every year something different, even though they lived out of town anyway.

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Caleb would crouch beside her at the porch and tie her shoelaces double-tight, then fix her little cardboard wings and face paint. He never laughed when she got the wings crooked. He just fixed it and said she looked perfect. When they walked the county road together, stopping at other homesteads, he'd carry her candy bag when it got too heavy, and he'd always trade Marie his peanut butter cups.

Glow worms by the road would light their path to the vibration of their feet walking by.

This year, she went with the neighbors. She was a moth, pale and silver, her wings stitched by Mama in the evenings. But she kept looking over her shoulder, like maybe Caleb had ducked behind a fence, waiting to jump out and say *'Boo*!'

Now it was November, and the rain had set in for good. Their porch lamps flickered in the dark. They hadn't heard from him in a couple months now. Not a letter, not a call. Mama said he was probably busy with classes, or maybe couldn't afford the stamps. Daddy said they should leave Caleb's room as it was, but Marie stood by the open door, tracing her finger across the bookshelf, feeling his presence.

The lamp hissed, steady and soft. Then Mama pulled out the old postcard set — the one with the picture of the mountains in summer — and handed it to her. "Write him," she said. "Tell him what you and the dog's been up to. Tell him it's Thanksgiving soon."

The porch light flickered again as the wind picked up. Marie asked if they should send a picture of home in a letter. Her father said, "You can describe it in your postcard."

She'd write something long, about everything she'd been doing since he left for school. She bent low, tongue peeking from the corner of her mouth, and wrote slowly.

"Dear Caleb, It is raining ag'in tonight. I miss you so fierce. When are you to home?"

She paused. "I hope Caleb remembers to use a stamp on his card," she said out loud.

Her father smiled gently and put his hand over hers. "I'm sure your brother will write."

Then her mother reached over and blew out the candle in the window.

Whispers Of A Painted Shore

Linda Symington hadn't planned to train her replacement — *they* asked her to. "No one knows our university libraries' Dewey zones like you," the dean had said, with that flat smile that always made her feel like she was being gently erased from the org chart.

She walked the girl — bright, polite, perpetually clicking through tabs — through the stacks, in final guidance for *'keeping it together'*. "Did you know Melville's 492-page unabridged 'Moby Dick' only weighs 12 ounces!?" The girl nodded at all the right moments, then, "So… what do you do, like, when you don't have work anymore?"

Linda never called it retirement. It was more like relocation — a shifting of catalogues. On nice days, she walked the shore at low tide with a canvas satchel and a field journal.

The rhododendrons had come into bloom, loud and unapologetic. A kind of botanical confidence she admired. She'd tried to watercolor them, but the pigments never caught the incandescence, or the way their shadows curled on the dune grass. Still, the act of painting became a meditation — not about getting it right, but about paying attention.

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Her legs were no longer weak from long standing, her mind was strangely sharp. This morning, the tide had left behind tiny dramas in the sand: the squiggle of a worm trail, a half-shell cupped like a whisper, the footprint of a sandpiper already half-erased by the breeze. She bent down to trace the circle of an anemone with her finger. Somewhere in her pocket, she kept a quote from Eiseley scribbled on a scrap of journal paper:

“We do not find it easy to stand in awe of things.”

She was learning. Slowly. The way infants learn by listening with their whole face. The way a whirling kite tugs happy screams from little children. A mob of high-schoolers, fresh from band practice, blowing trumpets and saxophones at the bus stop.

Farther down the beach, a man stood ankle-deep in the surf, flannel sleeves rolled to the elbow. He cast long and low, like he’d been born with a rod in his hand. She paused to watch. The arc of line sang, and on the second try he pulled in a flashing greenling, surf perch maybe — slick and furious, dragged backward through the shallows. Looking left and right, he noticed her watching, then reached the edge of the waves’ detritus. He held the fish down gently there, reverently, one wide palm braced against the sand.

“Want to touch it?” he asked, without looking up.

She hesitated, then crouched beside him. The fish twitched, gills pulsing.

“It’s cold,” she said, fingertips grazing the glistening scales.

“They always are,” he said. “Right out of another world.”

Her hand hovered a second longer, and her fingers brushed his — warm, callused, and alive in a way she hadn’t expected. She blushed, laughed a little.

“Didn’t mean to—”

He smiled. “No harm.”

Linda tucked the notebook under her arm, smiled awkwardly, gave a small wave, and walked slowly home without checking her phone.

The Skagit

The day before Darrington ‘Logging Days’ began, two men were setting spars above the river cut — lines of old Douglas fir meant to anchor the climbing contests. One was Ray Dillard, fifty-three and still strong in the back but careful now, slower than he’d admit. The other was his nephew, Buck, just turned nineteen and full of that foolish courage you can’t teach and don’t want to lose.

They had the rigging almost done when Ray caught a soft spot — rot beneath the bark like a lie under a handshake. He slipped but didn’t fall, thanks to Buck’s fast tie-off and a rope that held. Still, the silence afterward was heavier than the near-miss. The forest around them had gone still, watching maybe, or remembering. Ray wiped his brow, “Guess that one don’t want to be felled.” Buck didn’t laugh. They left that spar standing, like a grave they wouldn’t mark.

By the time the ‘Logging Days’ crowds gathered, you could feel that moment in the dust and diesel. There was carnival in the air — kettle corn, country music, a raffle for a side-by-side and a load of people. Kids ran with pinwheels painted red, white and blue,

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and a troupe of Girl Scouts sold sugar cookies. But some of the old-timers, they walked quieter. They looked up at the new spar poles — proud.

That afternoon, a woman (a *woman!*) from Granite Falls rang the bell first try, climbing with a fluid grace that made the crowd roar. It was a clean run — all heel and hand — and she smiled like she'd done it in her sleep. Back behind the bleachers, Ray watched with his arm in a sling and his jaw tight. Buck stood beside him, one hand on the old man's shoulder, eyes fixed on the spar they hadn't climbed.

Later, after the heat broke and the sun curled low behind Whitehorse Mountain, the Brewitts brought folding chairs to the fairway. Horace sat slow, knees cracking, and watched the sawdust drift like ash over the showgrounds. "Used to be you could hear the old growth giants falling from town," he said, half to himself. "Now all you hear is wind."

His granddaughter spun through the dusk with a blue ribbon pinned to her chest and a stick of pink cotton-candy floss big as her face. Horace looked at her like he was looking two generations deep — the girl, the trees, the weight of what had been felled and what still stood. The mountains, pale with last light, said nothing.

Her name was Willa, and to her, the whole thing felt like a fairy tale made of flannel and sweat. Men ran up trees like squirrels. Axes flew. The crowd whooped like thunder. She licked pink cotton-candy from her knuckles and leaned in close to Horace, teasing.

"Did you ever climb one, Grampa? Were you *scared*?" she laughed mischievously.

"Once," he said, eyes on the spar. "It was a lot taller than it looks." He paused. "I was nineteen, then, Willa. You don't get scared at nineteen. We were brave, then we learned the difference between brave and stupid."

The mountains have seen it all —
the axes, the saws, the old rhythms,
the men who cleared the way.
And still, we climb the spars in sport.
Still, we cheer. Still, we remember.
And still, the ghosts lean back and smile.

The Rainmaker’s Daughter

The Quad was a cathedral of pink. Cherry blossoms clung to April-wet branches, their petals trembling in the drizzle like hesitant applause. Fle’ur-814 sat perfectly still on the stone planter, her pearl-coated fingers curled around the umbrella’s handle.

Professor Wurlitzer, (Thad to friends) her creator, had said: “Here, Fle-ur, take this umbrella Go out on the Quad. Enjoy the cherry blossoms, then give me your thoughts.”

He was the director of Rainmaker Dynamics, funded through the University robotics research program. She had been powered on in silence, not with a triumphant chord or test sequence, but with Wurlitzer humming Leonard Cohen as he calibrated her ocular servos. Her process tag was RD#403d4b-43444a-414814. She was in a special series, a completely autonomous cyber-being, #5261696E6D616B6572-814. Wurlitzer called her Fle’ur-814, or just Fle’ur. She was his joy and laughter, born with beauty and grace.

‘What would you like me to think about, then”, she asked, whirring quirky on purpose.

Thad quoted, “Crocuses remind us of the promise of spring, their blooms are a vibrant testament to the seasonal transformation — you’re a kind of transformation, Fle’ur.”

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“Then I will return with a transactional tale of the Crocus symbol in Spring, and I will be his Smilax love. We shall grow comfortably old together and then become immortal!” she grinned, and grabbed an umbrella out of the rack.

Outside, the rain watered the flowers — gentle, steady, typical for Puget Sound.

Fog condensed on her opalescent carbon fiber skin as she sat in the slow drizzle. “I saw the sunset ere men saw the day,” she recited to no one, her voice a wind chime made of silver wires, aimlessly crossed. “Who am too wise in that I should not know.”

Poetry module had been Wurlitzer’s indulgence. A flourish, he called it. She was the only Fle’ur unit with poetry. She didn’t understand why wisdom would preclude knowing, but the words flowed mellifluously from her synth-voice subroutine, looping softly.

A student in a hoodie stopped. “You look like you’re off to see the Wizard!” he smiled.

Fle’ur-814 tilted her head. “I am not lost,” she said.

The boy grinned. “Could’ve fooled me. But you *are* missing those ruby slippers.”

She glanced down. Her feet were bare, pearl alloy gleaming under the rain-slick. “They were not stolen,” Fle’ur-814 objected, not quite sure if that was answering his question.

He choked on a laugh. “Okay, definitely not a Dorothy. Hey, my name’s Zain. This feels like I wandered into a Studio Ghibli film. Or maybe an old Doordarshan sci-fi serial.”

Fle’ur-814’s processors whirred. She turned. “You’re the Scarecrow Darshan, then? And you are seeking a brain, neh?” She pointed to the library tower, its windows glowing like a beacon. “That is your Emerald City, Zain of Darshan.”

Zain stared at her. Then at the tower. Back at her. “Why are you waiting here, then?”

“For the rain to stop,” then softly, ”Under my feet, the moon glides along the river.”

“It’s April in Seattle weather,” Zian shrugged. “It won’t,” not knowing what else to say.

Above them, a cherry blossom let go. It spun twice in the air before landing on the back of Fle’ur-814’s delicate pearlescent hand. She gazed down at it for a long time.

“Then I will wait to become wise.”

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The Lost Folio

The morning had come in soft, like warm fresh bread. Through the window panes, sunbeams fell in honeyed diagonals, dust motes dancing like lazy prophets.

It was Tuesday — or so the calendar said — but in the house at the end of Windmere Hollow, where Jeanette did her kitchen homeschool, days had their own names.

This day was called “Mocking Girl.”

“Why is it called that?” asked Lucie, pencil paused mid-air, her brows stitched.

“Because on this day,” Jeanette smiled, “the wind listens to our laughter.”

Lucie turned her head, half-believing.

Her little brother Cal, who had been watching his toes swing under the table, blinked and asked, “The wind laughs too?”

“Let’s try laughing with it,” Jeanette said, and let out a big laugh — long and silly.

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Lucie joined in, then Cal, waving his arms like wings, rising and falling, louder then softer, then gasping with joy.

The kitchen table was an ark: open foliobooks, jars of colored pencils, a chipped enamel mug that still held the faint scent of cinnamon. Along the sill, sprigs of rosemary and thyme. A basket of lemons waited without urgency. The bookshelves leaned with history — not curated, just lived. A blue kettle murmured on the stove behind them.

Today's lesson was not about fractions or grammar rules. It was about **maps**.

Not the ones that chart highways or state capitols — but the kind made of crayons and questions and family stories. The kind you find years later in a dusty drawer, and say, *Oh yes… I remember this place.*

"Here is where Grandma lived," Jeanette said, drawing a tidy garden house on a clean sheet of folio paper. "She made stars out of old buttons, remember?"

Lucie nodded. "She made the alphabet of buttons too. I liked her letter M the best!" She drew their house beside Grandma's, all full of clouds, with the letter 'L' over the door..

"And here," Jeanette continued, drawing a market stand, brushing a curl behind Lucie's ear, "is where I met your Dad. He brought me something special when we first talked."

"What was it?" Cal demanded. Jeanette drew an open book by the market stand.

She smiled. "A little book of poems. One line said, 'Hope is the thing with feathers.'"

Cal pointed straight-armed to the sky outside the window. *"Feathers are birds!"*

"That's right," Jeanette said gently. "And hope is like a little feathered bird inside us."

Lucie started writing Cal's words down, slowly: $F — E — A — T — H — E — R — S \ldots$ She liked the way the 2B pencil dragged softly over paper, how it left a trail behind, like breadcrumbs through a story. $A — R — E \quad B — I — R — D — S.$

"Look, Mom!" she waved her folio book.

Outside, the back yard rippled in dappled light. A jaybird squawked from a branch — then repeated itself a beat later, just a little off. It hopped onto the windowsill, snatched a peanut from the dish, and flicked its tail like it had a secret.

Lucie paused. “Did you hear that?”

“There she is,” Jeanette whispered. “The mocking girl.”

“She’s a bird?”

“She’s part of the clowns,” Jeanette said, correcting herself. “I mean — the *clouds*. But she acts like a clown sometimes. She repeats things so that we’ll notice her.”

So Lucie wrote: *M— O— C— K— I— N— G G— I —R— L*, and drew a bird, her feathers striped, standing on a peanut, saying something only other birds could understand.

Cal scribbled a swirl and swoosh of colors and held it up proudly. “This is our house in a storm. That’s the bird. The mocking girl flies inside the house to be safe!”

Time had folded into itself — quiet, invisible, passing. After lunch came story hour, then milk and cookies. Then naps. Lucie and Cal curled up with blankets and their housecat.

Jeanette stayed behind in the kitchen, washing slowly, the way you do when you don’t want a good day to end. She smiled that Guy’d agreed they wanted homeschooling.

She looked down at Lucie’s foliobook. The page was still open where she’d been writing.

At the bottom, in careful pencil: *A —W— E— L— O— N— E.*

Jeanette smiled, soft and proud. She’d help Lucie fix the spelling later. But the meaning — that part was already perfect.

Outside, the mocking girl called again — once to the day, once to the dusk, and once more, as if she were tucking the day itself into bed. Their new folios were gathered up with the rest that Jeanette was saving for when their children were teens, … then gone.

None of them lost.

Green Tea

The infants lay in their glowing cradles like small, unfinished prayers. Through the glass of the neonatal observation window, Miao-yi stood shoulder to shoulder with Vichara, their white lab jackets pressed together at the seams. Between them, silent and steady, stood Âbsâréa.

She was ten now. Taller than most, solemn in posture, and serene in her pale green hair that shimmered faintly under the nursery's ambient lights. Her eyes—clear, almond-shaped—studied the scene with neither surprise nor sentiment. Inside, twelve newborn girls, each with the same translucent hue to their hair, their skin aglow in a

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bioluminescent wash of soft mint light. Each lay nested in its own sterile cocoon, monitors blinking, IV trees humming gently.

To a stranger, it might have looked like a miracle—or a mistake. But to Miao-yi, it felt like the return of something long lost. Not a recurrence, but a reverberation. An echo of intention.

The glass reflected them faintly—three silhouettes, three generations of science and secrecy. And love.

In her twenties, Miao-yi's world had been full of sequence maps and pipettes, the clinical poetry of CRISPR edits and epigenetic toggles. Vichara, her husband, had walked into her life carrying a genome-wide methylation report under one arm and a flask of weak black tea under the other. He was from Phnom Penh. He loved stories. She loved structure. Their love grew like fungus: hidden, intricate, quietly brilliant.

After one long clinical year in Seoul, she took to practicing the Japanese tea ceremony at dusk. It calmed her, more than meditation, more than wine. Vichara would sit across from her, sipping quietly, as if the matcha tasted of something unspoken. Their days were filled with patient trials, gene loss mapping, post-chemo cognitive regression. But the tea—there was something in it. Tea drinkers seemed different. More themselves.

She joked once, "Maybe it's a gene." He said nothing.

Later that night, he returned from the lab with readouts and said, "What if it is?"

It took two years of quiet work. Mapping plant RNA. Finding compatibility. Funding the South Korean lab under an alias. They used mice first. Spliced the tea's sequences into early embryonic code. The first mouse lived three years. Never anxious. Solved mazes like easy riddles. Its fur shimmered faintly green in the lab lights.

When Miao-yi offered one of her harvested eggs as the next subject, Vichara hesitated for less than a second.

Nine months later, Âbsâréa was born under halogen lights in a borrowed delivery suite in Taichung. She did not cry. She blinked, looked straight at her mother, and cooed with something between recognition and invitation.

By two, she spoke five languages. By four, she corrected her preschool teacher's logic puzzle. She loved silence. She preferred ritual. She did not sleepwalk—but at night she would rise and sit quietly by the window, watching the stars as if listening for instructions.

They harvested more of Miao-yi's eggs. Each embryo carried the same edited fusion. They implanted them in surrogates, staggered by weeks. All were born female. All with the same green shimmer.

By the time Âbsâréa turned ten, there were twelve green-haired elvens.

Tonight, the girls sat together in their shared room. Twelve urchins in a ring on the soft green rug. The walls were painted with trees and floating koi. Toys were tidied on shelves. A wallpaper of joy. But the light in the room shimmered subtly.

Miao-yi watched from the hall. Vichara stood beside her, hand on the doorframe.

Inside, Âbsâréa sat cross-legged, eyes closed. Her small voice sang—not words, but tones, gently rising and falling like breath. Around her, the younger girls mirrored her posture, their movements faintly synchronized.

None of them opened their eyes.

A circuit. A resonance.

"What are they doing?" she whispered.

"Listening," said Vichara.

Maybe the real answer came from somewhere else beyond the stars.

Later, in bed, Miao-yi lay awake, staring at the ceiling. Her hand rested on her chest, as if to still a trembling that came from nowhere she could name.

She remembered the taste of matcha. The ceremony. The soft hiss of whisk against ceramic. The first time Âbsâréa laughed. The green shimmer in the mouse's fur. The way the girls swayed tonight, like leaves in a gentle breeze.

What had they made? Not a cure for aging. Not even a human-plant healthcare breakthrough. A new beginning.

And somewhere between genes and green tea, memory and meditation, something ancient had returned, a voice not heard in eons.

The world would ask one day. Would blame it. Hate it. Fear it. *Burn the Witches!*

But for now, the future could wait a little while. Could breathe a little more softly.

The Man Who Drew Ladders

I only came in for some chai.
The vendor knows me. Everyone knows me, I'm Babu the mango picker. The best.

The street vendor likes me sitting there early in theearly evening. It will draw in traffic. "How is your brother, Ramu?" he asks, wiping his hands on a rag.

He's more interested in Ramu anyway. Ramu is my older brother. After our sisters were married off and gone to Mumbai, Ramu inherited my father's 5 hectares. It will grow anything, really, especially the tomatoes and peppers that Ramu supplies to the local markets and food vendors. They love Ramu.

Ramu inherited the homestead after my father Rahul died. He was the best coconut harvester in Ratnagiri province. With only a twisted foot loop of *coir* and *rattan*, he'd climb the highest palms, 15 meters, even 20 meters tall. Rahul's father, our grandfather, was still alive but an invalid. Rahul wanted to show he could support our whole extended family, even my grandfather and grandmother. He worked very hard.

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Anyway, that's how Rahul died. Way up in some tree. A tractor moving totes and pallets backed into the tree he'd climbed. He was so intent on picking, that he lost his foot-hold and fell. It took several days for him to die. The plantation owner gave my grandfather ₹10,000 in rupees. That was the price for an accidental death back then.

"So how's your brother, Ramu," he says again. I told him Ramu is developing a new fruit, one nobody has ever tasted before, one that he grows in old leaky water jars. Then I finished my chai and slid ₹10 toward him. That's the price for a street chai. "No, no!" he insisted, "Wait for your *ragda pattice*! Tell me about this new fruit!"

So I told him I found it in the jungle one day, picking *alphonsos*. Those are the most expensive mangoes, so they let you take more time. I spotted the flower and fruits, and after we finished for the day, dug the plant up and brought it to Ramu. His wife, my sister in law, Leela, was happy to have someone adult to talk to, as he planted it.

Ramu took some fertile soil and filled an old water jar. The transplant grew like weeds. It had fine orange flowers. They opened at dusk and seemed to breathe. When you stood among them, and smelled their fragrance, time slowed — or felt like it did! The sweet fruits from it were like *jujubes*, but bigger, like *kumquats*.

Ramu got ₹100 a dozen for them, so his 'eyes got big'. He made a deal with the local water jar potter and ordered 18 pots. I know, crazy. 18! He collected the fruit seeds and soon had his 18 transplants in 18 pots, turning out rupees like a coffee grinder!

That's when I should have kept my mouth shut. See, Leela's sister Lelani was at the house when I stopped by. She doesn't like me, because I'm still single. I think she talks behind my back. That makes me brag more about being the top mango picker.

"Yeah, well, my mangoes sell for ₹1800 a dozen in Mumbai! If Ramu had any smarts, he'd sell his flower-fruits in the jar to rich people for their estates, to show to guests!" *₹10,000 rupees!* I should not have said that. We can't take our words back.

Right, so Ramu had to play 'The Man of Mystery®.' He bought chalk at the market, and started scribbling math all over on the walls, strange hieroglyphs and formulas he had learned, in the short time he had been in school, before our father, you know, died.

دونوں اطراف کے مربعوں کا مجموعہ اخترن کے مربع کے برابر ہے۔ ایک مثلث کی بنیاد ڈپریشن زاویہ کے ترچھے اوقات کا گناہ ہے. مثلث کے تین زاویوں کا مجموعہ 180 ڈگری ہے۔

Stuff like that. Leela pulled her hair. "You're not thinking right! Have you ever been to the city? Do you know how far away the city is! *I can't believe you listen to Babu!"*

Ramu loftily iced her with a stare. "You'll see. I will find the distance with science!"

Lelani, seeing the beehive she had churned up, made an excuse to not visit for awhile. Leela pointed toward the market and yelled at me. OUT! Then her kids started to cry.

OK, so, from what I heard and saw from a distance, going back and forth after work, Ramu started chopping bamboo on our 5 hectares, not clearing the land, but making a scaffold he could climb on. Leela did her best to cook and take care of the kids and water the plants, but how could she harvest their tomatoes and peppers to sell in the market? Where could she leave the children? They still owed for the 18 water jars!

Ramu was *in the vibe*. Slowly his skeleton bamboo scaffold reached higher and higher. I stopped by when I knew Leela would be at the market. "Ramu, who's going to climb that thing? You're afraid of heights since Dad died. He asked you, but then you ran away!"

Right, I should learn to keep my mouth shut. Ramu realized he couldn't see over the tree tops, so he'd have to build his scaffold higher and higher. Grasping, sweating, clutching tight the ladder, pleading to his gods. Each new tier of scaffold swaying like a prayer.

At last one day he said he was finished. He showed me, scratching with chalk on the side of a water jar how the math went. Then with a rude pair of wooden calipers, like our grandfather would have carved with the tools we still kept, and with an iron chisel he scratched out the marks for a rude चाँदा (*chanda)* for measuring geometry angles.

Tools in a *kamarband*, he began to climb. When Ramu reached tree-top level his knees began to shake. His grip was frozen so tightly, that he had to look straight at the distant clouds to keep from fainting. Up there, it wasn't the wind that unsteadied him. It was the closeness of something vast — like being near the beating heart of the divine.

"What can you see!?" I bellowed up at him, far above. I don't think he heard me.

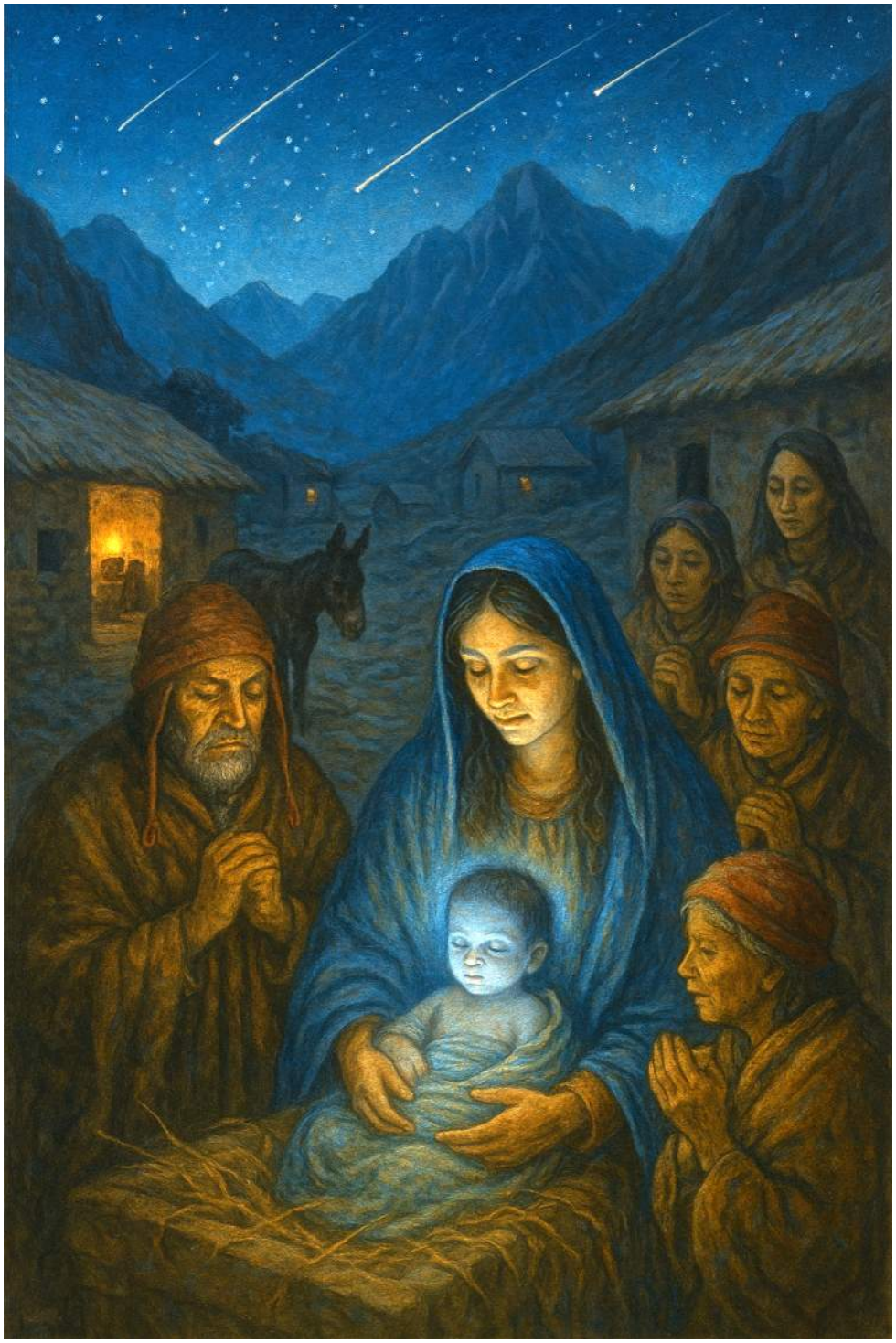
"Husband," Leela shouted, "Tell me, are you near enough to touch Heaven?"

Ramu turned at the sound of his beloved wife's voice to shout down, "Almost there!" But in turning he changed his grip, and in looking down, lost his balance, and from that great height, like our poor father, he plunged to his death right at our feet. In the dust, scattered among the shattered science, were bits of chalk and torn sketches — his *chanda* and caliper, his impossible plan, blurred like dreams in sudden waking.

Leela, having now a dead husband, three hungry children, a garden she couldn't maintain, and 18 water jars, remarried to the jar maker, who got his 18 jars back.

I, Babu, brother of Ramu, son of Rahul, am still the fastest mango picker in Ratnagiri!

The Boy Who Could Hear Stars



They said Anun was born during the night the stars fell. Not one or two, as in a wishful tale. But hundreds, streaming across the dark like glowing threads unwinding from the sky. The elders lit incense and muttered old prayers. The dogs would not stop barking.

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And when the boy came — quiet, eyes wide, breath like wind through reeds — his mother wrapped him in wool and did not speak his name for seven days.

Not out of fear. Out of reverence.

He was different from the first breath. He did not cry. He did not babble. He watched. He listened. Even as a toddler he would sit for hours on the stone steps, chin in hand, gazing skyward like an old man remembering a name.

His uncle called it *stillness*. His mother called it *tuning*. “He’s hearing things we can’t,” she’d say, while weaving. “Give him time. He’ll speak when the stars finish whispering.”

The villagers said it was a blessing, then said it was odd, then stopped saying anything.

By the time he was seven, Anun had begun drawing. Not pictures of sheep or mountains or mothers and sons. But long curling maps, spiraled with lines and dots and tiny inked marks — like waveforms, or languages no one could read.

He drew them in the dust, and with soft stone on the walls of the sheep pen.

When asked what they were, Anun would only shrug. “They’re what I hear.”

So they nicknamed him *Erqe-rinri*, the boy who hears the stars.

At ten, Anun still didn’t speak much, but what he heard — and what he drew — began to matter. Maps no one could see at first. Spirals with branching paths, filled with rising notches and arcs like cloud movements.

He’d climb the cliffs above the village just before dawn. Sit for hours with his ear pressed against the stone, his body stilled to such quiet that even the birds did not flinch near him. Then he’d stand to face the sun, his fingers lacing maps in the air.

“They’re not echoes,” he told his mother once. “Not wind, not water. It’s deeper.”

His maps became more organized. Grids. Pulses. Movements of the moon. Curved notations that seemed to shift with the seasons. The village schoolteacher, who had once studied physics, thought it looked like wave interference. Sound signatures.

She gave Anun a box of chalk sticks to draw with. “You’re imagining wonderful things,” she said. *“Quizás dibuje alguno para nosotros con tiza.”* (Perhaps draw them for us.)

Villagers started asking him questions, then. But not directly. They’d stop him on the trail, or leave berries by his door. One farmer brought him an egg wrapped in cloth.

“What does this one mean?” they asked, pointing to his latest design, carved with charcoal into a piece of scrap wood. “Should we wait a week to plant this year?” Another insisted he answer, "Will my black-faced ewe have one lamb, or two?”

Anun only blinked. “They’re not mine,” he said again. “They’re only what I *hear*.”

But word spread and soon others came from far-off villages to inquire of the village priest where the famed *Erqe-Rinri* lived, and where they could worship his abilities.

When the storms started coming out of season, at first villagers blamed the wind. When their mountain goats gave birth in midwinter and the lambs died, they called it *malo*. But when the priest fell ill — the one who had scoffed, said the boy’s silence was arrogance, said his drawings were devil work — people began to whisper.

“He hears things we cannot. He knows of calamities! Maybe he is a witch?”

The cathedral bell fell three days later, crashing through the steeple into the *dais*.

After that, they stopped calling him *Erqe-rinri*. They started calling him *star-witch*, *stone-listener*, *ghost-son*. Someone placed burnt salt outside his mother’s door sill.

And then came the meetings. The pueblo gathered in secret as they worked to repair the church steeple and rehang the bell that tolled every Sunday across the valley.

Voices a low murmur like bees trapped under a bowl. Anun stood at the edge, bare feet cold on the earthen floor, beside his mother. No one looked at him directly.

Too many unlucky things. Too many strange drawings. The weather was turning at odd times. The village was out of sync with nature and now it seemed, with an angry God, punishing them for their blasphemy.

“It isn’t *us* who changed,” Anun said, surprising everyone as he stood at the doorway, in the shadow, in the quiet place between coming and going, between repentance and forgiveness. The blessing threshold.

His voice was soft. Clear. “It’s the stars. You just weren’t listening.”

Anun and his mother left the village in spring.

Not with ceremony, nor violence — just silence. A silence thick as river clay. Only his mother’s sandals slapping the dust. Only the tether-ropes of the mule creaking.

A few children watched them go from behind a crumbling wall. One of them, a girl with wind-burnt cheeks, raised a hand in farewell, then turned and ran away.

No one else did. Like the moon quietly passing into the dawn of a new day.

The village had no word for banishment. Only the old Quechuan phrase for '*sent beyond the maize*'. To the high ground. Past where the stone terraces end.

There, in a sheep-herder's hut no bigger than a goat stall, Anun and his mother made a new life. Clay stove. Flat stones for sleeping. Rain cairn, to melt ice and snow in.

Anun's mother began to speak less. So did he.

They no longer needed words.

He climbed higher each night. Past the ridges marked by llamas, into the places no herder bothered with. He pressed his face to the rock. Not only to listen now — but to feel. The earth had breath, and it rose and fell like a dreamer in sleep.

Then Anun would return at dawn with roots and bulbs he dug, and with snow to melt.

One night, there was no moon. Only stars. And they *sang*.

Not as music. Not as language. As *pattern*. A weaving of pulses that turned and turned, like a knot unraveling in reverse. As if they were speaking backwards.

He still drew with his fingers in the air. Dancing. The way the priest once moved his hands in blessing the pueblo. The way his mother combed her hair. The gestures that meant something, from before we knew what meaning was.

Invisible spirals. A slow cymatic choreography.

The sky *watched him back*.

He didn't notice, at first, what changed. Only that the animals began moving oddly. That the llamas turned their heads to the sky before storms came. That pumas didn't cat-call at night. That the stone birds carved in the old walls — they seemed different. The way the light hit them. Their shadows no longer aligned with the seasons.

His mother said little. She watched him as one watches someone waking from sleep.

Carefully. Gently.

“Erqe-rinri,” she whispered once, placing her hand to his cheek. “What do the stars say of you and me now?”

“They don’t speak of our future,” he replied, “They speak of *becoming the wind*.”

He drew a new map. The largest he had ever made. Not in chalk, nor in dirt — but in cairns. Stacked stones across a distant ridgeline. Markers. Pointers. A great curving arc that aligned with no star-chart anyone had ever seen.

Then he sat in silence at its center. Even the ceaseless Andean wind went silent.

When his mother died that winter, Anun buried her beneath the cairn that pointed true East. The mountain held her breath now. The sky would carry her spirit, in the winds.

And still Anun listened. For what? *For what!?*

Below, in the valley where his pueblo turned against him, the weather grew strange. Clouds no longer obeyed the mountains, and swirled in huge dark billows threatening flood. But then, despite prayers and offerings, the rain never came. Dogs barked at empty paths filled with spirits. Elders lit incense and muttered incantations.

Years passed in silence and confusion. The villagers began to doubt. To fear they were lost, had cast out a se’er, and were now plagued with invisible daemons.

One day a satellite failed, disintegrating as it fell. Then another. Then five more, all in a night. Atacama observatories called it, ‘*Estoy cansado’*, the satellites ‘were tired’. They could find no reason for it, in their huge telescopes that can ‘see back to Big Bang.’

Satellite communications began to fail. NASA uplinked new commands to Star Link, but now no data came back. Soon the world would become silent too. In the old way.

In cities, people felt it first as static electricity. Phones that wouldn’t stop humming. Dogs pacing doorways. Birds flying at dusk in spirals no one could explain. The sun even flickered once, like a skipped frame in an old film reel!

High in the Andes, Anun stood among his cairns, his bare feet steady on frostbitten stone. He did not shiver. He did not blink.

He simply turned his face to the sky. Waiting.

The wind dropped to nothing. And then the mountain *sang*.

Not aloud, not in language — but in that old, old voice of pattern. The same voice he'd followed since he could crawl. His arms rose, tracing loops in the darkness. Spirals.

The great signature of motion. Not to warn. Not to summon. But to *meet*.

A bloom of light unfolded across the stars. Not falling — *calling*. And the ground trembled beneath him, not in fear, but in recognition. Like a tuning fork when another rings near to it. Like a bell, struck across eons. Stone answering sky. Rocks remembering when they were first born in fire.

The sky trembled. Not with fire. Not with ruin. But with a sound like memory.

The sky opened then. Stars began to fall. Like autumn leaves of comets.

They said you could hear the stars
whoosh through the air,
crackling in odd sounds,
like glass ornaments tinkling,
or icicles when they break and fall.

Circle Game

I'm standing at my classroom window, late in the day, when the world has already tilted toward the commute. The desks are scattered with pencils and unfinished exit slips, curled corners of paper that seem to breathe in the fading amber light.

I should clean up, but I can't seem to look away.

October has its own way of lingering—its sun a kind of gold that softens everything it touches. Chalk dust floats in shafts across the room, motes sun-glinting to catch my attention, brightening, dimming, as if they were tiny signals from some invisible language. For a heartbeat I imagine them as fireflies, out of season, out of time, writing brief stories in the air. But the motes hold me still. They wink at me, these tiny, impossible things, as if they know a secret about this room that I've forgotten.

It was a good day. I felt it in the way my students bubbled with chatter, sketching costume ideas on the margins of worksheets, whispering jokes to each other. Their

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chaos is never the same from one day to the next—sometimes jagged, sometimes unruly, but always alive. Today it felt like spark. I could have hushed them, could have drawn them back into straight rows and bullet points, but instead I let the energy play itself out. Perhaps teaching is less about order than about noticing when the light bends just so, when the moment itself glimmers.

Ms. K, do you believe in ghosts? I saw their eyes light up like beacons.

I used to. I used to believe in heroes, too—knights and saints and fools who charged at windmills with nothing but a wooden sword. I read them Cervantes last week, the old story thick as honey in my mouth. *Do children today even have real heroes?*

In our lessons, we try to pass down legends. We read them of Three Kingdoms and betrayals on ancient bridges, the noble hero pierced at last by a daemon blade. They scarcely listen. One yawns and fidgets. Another chews the splintered end of a pencil. There's Bridget, a scrape on her new Adidas, tracing the scabbed line as if it were the only story worth telling. And we, bearers of myths, feel a pang—how can they be so unmoved, so untouched by our old dramas? Do they even have heroes anymore?

Perhaps their indifference is not emptiness, but overflow. To them, the idea of the dying hero is less vivid than the rush when they spin until the ground tilts. Perhaps the stories they need are the ones they write with their own feelings, circling faster, chanting louder, refusing to sit still for the slow march of narrative. Their games hold reason too, though abstract to us—rituals written in the code of their generation. We misread them when we imagine those games are meaningless.

The district office says we must measure SEL Student Joy now. *True!* They've given us rubrics, spreadsheets, boxes to check: *Engagement. Participation. Enthusiasm.* Last week, I threw the lesson plan out the window and let students run wild in the school-yard instead. They spun in circles until they collapsed, grass-stained and gasping, their laughter rising. Then we fingerpainted Science. *So much fun!*

There are flickers, like that, when a sunbeam brushes the day. Between them lie a thousand states, some light, some dark. Then the scolding administration, selling their tomato-soup filled with alphabet words—thick with them—but no tomatoes.

On some days, darkness peers in through narrow cracks: the squabbles of parents, the slow grind of systems that drain curiosity. I see these shadows in the edges of the PD training, glassy-eyed meetings, where spark is tossed for 'intersectionalism'. The children sense it—of course they do. They shrug it off, not because they are blind but because they prefer to weave their own rules out of rhythm and breath.

The Principal says, *"You're not to refer to yourselves as teachers. You're instructors of the Central Curriculum. Your task is to maintain classroom order, and keep your students' heads down on their 'Read & Repeat!' Individualized Lesson Plans."*

I saw their eyes die. Instead of running in yelling and laughing, they came in late. So I cheated, OK? 'Class, today we're going to write stories together." A hand went up, "What kind of stories, Ms K?" That was Ayesha. She needs to know 'what kind of's.

"We're going to make up our own real story," I held up the chalk, then drew a long horizontal line. They went silent. I drew the silhouette of a city skyline, then a second closer profile of bodegas and bars, store-front churches and even a corner gas station. There were trees and park benches, a stick figure boy and girl, and a stick figure dog.

"Jacques and Sofia went to the bodega with their dog Mutter, to buy some mangoes."

I handed out boxes of chalk to each row, and backhand-waved, pass them around. They waited until I whispered: "...and then what happened?" pointing to the board.

Hands flew up, students were chosen, a few at a time, and they raced up to the board to write the next lines in our storybook. Then we all read them together, and I drew more characters and scenes. "...and then what happened?" Again. Again. Whirling. For their

exit-slip, I had them finish their story, as they would have intended it to. Dillon, our Asberger's special needs, observed drily, "These are not real stories."

Like I said, it was a 'good' day. 'Make lemonade', right? By the time I finally gathered my things, the light outside had deepened to a cool indigo. The dust in the classroom has settled. I carry the heat of the day with me, a quiet hum that learning is less a straight path than a circle, always spiraling outward, always returning again.
Out in the yard, I imagine them again: children spinning beneath trees, their laughter rising like breath in autumn fog. The open book lies forgotten on a nearby bench, its legends fluttering in the wind, pages turning themselves. The children don't need it now. Their circle itself is the story. Their arms stretch outward, their feet pound the earth, and the sky itself bends with their motion.

I smile at the thought, watching it form behind my eyes, a memory that feels both ancient and immediate. Teaching is this, I realize: not the passing down of old myths, but the noticing of new ones as they happen—fragile, luminous, untamed.

And if I had to close the day with one last thought, I'd wonder what they do after school, after dark, when the world is bathed in twilight, in their imagination.

Oiseau Mouche (The Hummingbird)

I remembered the hummingbirds in my grandmother's garden, back in Cebu. The sun was heavy there, thick like honey, and the air smelled of guava and stone. One feeder yellow-flowered, one red-flowered, to catch the eye of the tiny birds. Enchanting.

I noticed the anxious hummingbird — the one darting like an emerald jewel on a string, wings always a blur. Unlike the others, it never fed in peace. It chased every rival away, chittering the air with its tiny fury. Then it hovered before my Lola's verandah, as though it was pleading for more assurance: **Is there enough? Will the sugar run out?**

Lola would shake her head softly, amused. "There are always many feeders and one or the other is always kept refilled," she would say. "One is for the fearful bird, one is for the brave. Which one would you become, *anak*?"

I never knew fear, so I had no answer. I enjoyed watching the birds. Still, the question stayed with me, quiet and unspoken, like a stone in the pocket of my memory, as I grew into adulthood, and the urgency and needs of adulthood shaped my life after the nursing college in Cebu, when my happy graduation became a search for work in the States.

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Now, years later, I am far from Cebu, far from my old home. The scent of antiseptic replaces guava flowers, and the song of tropical birds is drowned by the steady hum of ventilators and monitors. But the hummingbird memory follows me down the bright hospital corridor as I push open the heavy door of the children's cancer ward.

I entered his room quietly, so I wouldn't wake him, carrying a tray of small things: fresh water, clean towels, a rolled blanket. My steps were soft, but the air was still. Then…

"Am I going to die?"

Alex's voice was thin but insistent. The question wasn't new. I had heard it before, maybe a dozen times. Always in the same trembling rhythm. Always with hands reaching, tugging at shirt sleeves as if words could hold a body together.

That day it was Dr. Ha-Joon who was caught up, his sleeve clutched by Alex's thin fingers. I saw him bend low, professional, precise. But he was also cool. Dismissive, almost. His tone said: *not now, not here, not for me to answer.*

"There, there," he murmured, brushing the boy's hand free. His words were factual, efficient. He pointed to charts, talked about chemo dosage, white cell count numbers and test intervals. But the space between his syllables was as cold as bathroom tiles.

Alex withdrew into silence, eyes closed, not convinced, not reassured. The question still hovered like an unbanished ghost. I could see it in his face.

I set the tray down and moved with practiced motions, smoothing the sheets and blanket, checking the drip tube needle and hanging bag of chemo solution. I was part of the room, but not the center of it. I listened. I saw in his pleas what others missed.

I want to break you out of the prison of your small body, Alex, free your worry.

His eyes opened and turned to me, then away. I did not speak yet. I was not a doctor. I was not his parent, but Alex was my child, in a way. I was something here — a caretaker, a nurse-technician to keep order and calm, the quiet presence at the edges of fear.

Again in my mind, brilliant jeweled wings flashed. The anxious bird hovered before a window, frantic. The memory pressed close, waiting for its moment to reveal. I lingered. Alex lay awake, his small hands resting on the blanket. His eyes opened again, staring at the ceiling, listening to my silence. The his question came again, softer:

“Am I going to die?”

It was asked to the air, to the ceiling, maybe to me. I let silence after hold a breath for a moment, then moved to the edge of his bed. “When I was a girl, my grandmother kept hummingbird feeders outside her window. Many of them. Always kept full.”

Alex blinked, uncertain what truth this brought to him, but listening quietly.

“There was one bird,” I continued, “so afraid that the sugar would run out, it chased every other bird away. It never rested. Always guarding, always worried. Yet, when one feeder grew low, there was the other, still full. My Lola used to say: ‘There is always enough. One for the fearful bird, one for the brave.’

Are you afraid?” I whispered.

“I don’t know,” he sighed.

“That’s all right,” I replied. “You don’t have to know yet. But remember, there is always enough. You can be afraid, or you can be brave. The choice is yours.”

He closed his eyes. I smoothed the blanket, adjusted his pillow. The question didn’t vanish, it rested now, folded into the memory of blurred wings and that quiet shared moment in a timeless passage of time in a silent hospital room.

When my shift ended, I stepped outside into the pre-dawn cool, touched with stoney dampness. Above the hospital’s shadowed garden, moths still flickered in the glow of a lamp, and for a moment I almost saw the shimmer of hummingbird wings.

My cell buzzed. The text: “Pediatric oncology, STAT. Ward eleven.” I froze, heart pounding. I was already moving before I was aware, lines on the linoleum blurring.

Please, not Alex, please God! I prayed, rounding the corner of the pediatric wing aisle. At the nurses' station, I saw the door to Alex's room propped open. But the bed was empty, fresh sheets and blankets folded neatly. A new pillow. My heart stopped.

"Ha-Joon moved him to 11A!" another nurse said, running past. We both ran to the call. It was a young girl, paralyzed by a car crash, brought here on life support. She had flat-lined. Her room was filled with a burst of activity, responding to 'Code Blue'.

Ha-Joon looked at her monitor, then ordered chest compressions after we stabilized the girl's neck against trauma. A crash cart rolled in with pads, and he gave her a shot of epinephrine. Our airway management nurses smoothly intubated her.

He compressed the girl's chest in a steady rhythm. Nothing on the monitor. He called for defib paddles, and shocked once, then twice. She came back to us. *Beep…beep….*

Later, after her condition was stable, I pushed open the door on 11A. The room was bright, curtains open. Alex was there, sleeping, small shoulders rising and falling. He was still alive. Maybe in his dream he was silently asking to be brave.

I walked home with lighter steps, carrying him in my heart, and the memory of my Lola in her garden. I hope Alex finds those hummingbirds, too.

Jar of Fireflies

Alan's first memory was of light. He had grown up on an elm-lined street where the summers were thick with humidity, and the evenings held a secret magic. Fireflies stitched the dusk with their erratic signals, rising from the lawns and hedges like small, wandering sparks at dusk. Their flashes mesmerised him for hours.

He'd linger until the dark grew thick and the fireflies seemed more like stars fallen into the grass than insects at all. Only then would he run inside, thoughts already in his head, certain that tomorrow he would begin to crack the code.

Alan was more like a mendicant monk than a child. His mother understood. *"You were always old,"* she told him once, smiling with the weight of their shared truth.

She was his light. While his brothers threw balls in the yard, she baked pies with him and helped with his homework. She trusted him to roam far and wide. "Did you have a good time, honey? Wash up for supper!" she'd call. No matter how far he ranged, when his bike was set aside for the bus ride into the city, he'd spend entire days in museums and libraries, she'd ask only, "Did you have a good time?"

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Years later, when his own daughter Eleni was ready to balance on two wheels, Alan found the same jar of light in her. “Ready?” he asked, steadying the handlebars.

“I can do this Dad, *watch me!”*

She pushed off before he could answer, wobbled, straightened, and suddenly the air was full of her laughter. She kept that laughter always. Early in pre-dawn, her soft giggling laughter from her room, amusing herself with imaginings while the world slept.

Their summer evenings turned into a shared biking ritual. They pedaled the river trails and backroads, inventing ‘I Spy’ contests as the sky deepened. First to spot a heron, first to spot a wild cherry tree, first to decipher the evening firefly’s code.

“Short-short-long,” she laughed. “That one says *hello, hello, wait!*”

Alan laughed back. “Then answer him back, quick, before he gets away!”

Eleni lifted her hands from the handlebars and flashed her little fingers twice in the air, as he thought: *this is the person I was meant to find. She is always new*. But then — their bike path crossed the highway. Alan had looked back, warning, ‘Be careful!’ Eleni smiled straight at him, ‘I will!” She never saw the car turning into her.

The screech, the thud, the shock that split their lives. Alan threw his bike aside and wailed at the taste of copper in his mouth, the desperate way he shouted her name.

At the hospital, frantic with grief, he waited. Time fractured into beeps and pulses, the steady respiration of ventilators He sat beside her bed, fingers wrapped around hers, signaling softly, ‘short-short-long’ to tether her to the world.

“Remember the fireflies?” he whispered. “Eleni, you hear me? You are still with us.”

By skill, by luck, by doctors who worked until their arms sagged with fatigue — she pulled through. Yet when the casts came off and the crutches were folded away, something terrible remained. Her new bicycle in the garage stood untouched.

“Ride with me?” he asked one bright-blue Saturday, hopeful.

Eleni shook her head. “Not anymore, Dad.”

“Not even around the block?”

“No, Dad. Please. I don’t want to.” Her eyes slid away, to her cell phone, to the private world of friends and messages and laughter that she had built in recovery.

Alan nodded, head down. Inside a storm howled. Rage at the fate, at the stupid blind chance that had broken their lives. Desperation at times, at the inexorable turning of one’s children into teens, and then … to strangers. He had hoped Eleni would ride with him forever, old-alongside-new.

Now he rode alone. And he rode furiously. Miles upon miles, lungs clawing for air. Heart pounding. Wheels spinning streets and paths blurred into asphalt rivers, the wildness pressing close. He chased the fury as if – as if Eleni might be waiting just ahead, laughing with her fingers their firefly semaphore again.

Grief spun him like a wheel until thought blurred. He rode because he could not sit still at home, pedaling through suburbs and country lanes, lungs torn against the dark. Motion was prayer. Tires hummed a mantra. Streetlamps smeared into streaks; stars wheeled sharp above.

Always the same thought: *If I keep riding, maybe I’ll find Eleni again.*

His rides took him farther than he intended, far into the country and a narrow lane at the end of it, tucked behind a weather-beaten stable. Three horses looked up, then went back to their grazing. Lanterns glowed beyond. He dismounted, pushing his bike with trembling legs, past a wooden gate, and found the hidden temple garden.

A pond reflected the first evening stars, filled with yellow irises, white lilies and thin reeds. A frog plopped and disappeared. Moss crept over stepping stones. And in the center, a stone Buddha sat with hands folded, its face softened by seasons of rain.

Fireflies drifted here too, more numerous than he had ever seen. They bobbed over the reeds, glimmered in the maple branches, moved in slow constellations.

Alan sat on a stone bench and let his breath settle. For the first time in months he no longer felt the need to chase, or to flee. Their lights flickered, paused, answering each other in ways he no longer tried to decipher.

Then — a chimera, imagined softly: Eleni's voice beside him, laughing in the dark. *Short-short-long*. *Hello, hello, wait!*

He looked around, throat choking. A firefly blinked near the statue's eye, and for a moment the carved face seemed lit from within. Its eyes were filled with a wisdom — of patience and of their shared presence: *Everything is an illusion of permanance*.

Then Alan understood. His life, his jar of fireflies, was never meant to hold the light. Fireflies blinked and were gone, children grew and drifted away, nothing was fixed. The only secret worth keeping was to watch, to love, to let the light go where it must.

He lifted his hand, giving two clumsy blinks with his fingers. *Short-short-long*.

The firefly on Buddha's face pulsed twice in reply.

Alan smiled, and for the first time in a long while, he felt new again.

Blue Bird

The sun was already high, burning the tar soft and shiny, and the wind kept lifting the edge of my thumb like it didn't belong to me.

Grinding gears.

The long shush of air brakes.

Crackle of shoulder gravel under 100 psi.

A door swinging open above me like a gate.

"Hop in!"

The truck was taller than any house I had ever lived in. Chrome mirrors. Dust along the steps. The driver leaned across the passenger seat and pushed the door wider.

"Do you need help up?" he said, not unkindly.

I climbed in quick.

The cab smelled like diesel, coffee, and something fried. The seat swallowed me. When he pulled back onto the highway, the engine roared like it was pulling an 8-gang plow.

We didn't speak much at first. The road unspooled ahead of us in a straight gray ribbon. Telephone poles counted time. I watched fence posts flick by and tried to look older than I felt. The slamming door. The *'I'm never coming back!"* The dog left behind the screen.

"First day?" he asked, breaking my gloom.

I shrugged. He knew I was green.

He nodded as if that was enough to answer.

At the next truck stop, he swung wide into the lot and parked with a hiss of brakes. The world outside shimmered with afternoon heat. Inside, the diner was all chrome and red vinyl, the air thick with salt and grease.

He ordered two hamburgers and fries before I could protest.

"You've got to eat if you're going to travel," he said.

I tried to thank him without sounding broke.

He joked with the waitress like he'd known her for years. His laugh was easy. When the food came, he slid the plate toward me and watched to make sure I started. I realized he was a native Indian, — not from around these parts.

Outside he'd eaten, he hopped out and lifted the hood. Heat rose like a ghost escaping. He checked the oil, wiped the dipstick clean with a rag from his back pocket, tightened something with a wrench. He moved around the truck with a rhythm that was almost dancing — a step back, a lean forward, a spin of the cap, a tap of metal.

"You don't smile much," he said, not looking at me.

I didn't answer. The truth was I was holding everything tight — my face, my hands, my breath, for whatever came next. If I smiled, I thought something might spill out too sad.

He studied me for a long second. Then he did something I didn't expect.

He set the wrench down. He leaned against the side of the truck.

Then he rolled up his pant cuffs.

Gray. Smooth. Wooden legs.

Both of them scarred, like he was made that way.

“Lost ’em a long time ago,” he said, like he was talking about a pair of old leather gloves. “Still got places to get to.”

That was all. No story. No explanation. No request for sympathy. Hard fact.

I wanted to ask, but I didn't. You don't ask a man like that about the past. You let it go. You raise your arms up and free it, like a blue bird, soaring away to heaven.

I stared at the dashboard for miles. I’d thought I was stepping into something difficult on the road. I imagined hunger, rain, nights under bridges, maybe work, if I could find it, that bent my back.

I never imagined that someone could lose half themselves and still drive a truck, and laugh at waitresses, and hop around like he was born to it.

The highway narrowed. Fields opened. A line of trees gathered in the distance.

He slowed. Signaled. Grinding gears. The long shush of air brakes. “I can’t take you any farther,” he said. “I turn off up ahead.”

The truck idled on the shoulder. The sun pressed against the dusty windshield. For a second, I wanted to ask him something — anything — that would make the time real. Instead, I nodded, and climbed down.

My boots hit gravel. The truck door shut with a heavy, certain sound. He lifted a hand once from the wheel, looking at me, then eased the truck back into motion. I watched it until it was smaller than my thumb, then gone.

The road ahead looked no different than it had that morning. But somehow the rosebud and plum blossoms gave it a hit of Spring, and maybe a new life down the road.

Then an old pickup passed. A friendly farmer waved.

Then it was just me, and the Way. Still a thousand miles to go.

So I started walking.

Threads of Light and Smoke

Ami Winlo was ten, small for her age, but inside her mind's eye entire worlds lived, with rivers and mountains, deserts and clouds, all arranged just so. Even in the classroom, under the tired buzz of fluorescent bulbs, Ami found magic. When she raised her hand, her sleeve caught the shimmer, and for a moment she imagined she could pull a silver thread from the air, unspooling it like silk.

Her teacher at Taipei American School was writing on the board. Their assignment, to write a short paper on "Marvels of the Modern World." Ami copied the task down in her note binder. Her eyes drifted to the red cover of the history book, gleaming darker than it should, as though it carried its own inner golden fire. What 'marvels'?

At home the light changed again. Evening poured warm and golden across the table, soft on the bowls and chopsticks, softer still on her mother's face. Ruisi moved quietly, a current beneath the surface, ladling vegetable soup, passing bowls of rice, steadying the rhythm of the family. Tán, her younger brother, made faces with his mouth full, puffing his cheeks, and Ami burst into laughter. In that glow, she felt a circle forming—light around their faces—a light she wanted to keep forever.

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Ruisi placed daikon radish kimchi onto Ami and Tán's plate, to go with the rice. “You were writing something at the table. Is that your school assignment?” she asked Ami.

Ami straightened a little, pushing her school book aside. “It’s called Marvels of the Modern World. We’re supposed to pick marvels that show how the world is made.”

Tán snorted, his round head like baby Buddha. “I pick Spider-Man and Yan!” Yan was that famous Chinese superpowered teen avenging her family's massacre. Ami had always secretly identified with Yan, as maybe a someday ‘woman warrior’ herself.

Ami rolled her eyes. “Not that. Real marvels. Things people made, or found, or built. Or things in nature,” teacher said. “I have to pick two to write a story.”

“And what are the marvels you chose, *xiǎo mèi*?” Ruisi asked.

Ami tapped her chopsticks against her bowl, thinking. “First… hmmm… Escalators, because they carry people upward, like magic stairs that never stop moving. And last—” she hesitated, her voice inquisitive, “Waterfalls, because they’re bigger than ourselves, and they roar like tigers, and they never stop flowing.”

Ruisi closed her eyes for a moment. Her husband, Robert Winlo, Ami and Tán's father, had lost his life climbing a frozen waterfall the year before, in a winter sport accident.

Tán, too young, really, to remember his father, made a dramatic bow across the table, his chopsticks sword in hand. "The Marvelous Temple of Ami, Ruler of Land of Yan!"

Ami laughed, cheeks warming. Her mother reached to steady Tán's rice bowl before it tipped. "Those sound like good choices," Ruisi said. "Remember, marvels are not only what we see, but what we feel too. In your school paper, show how they relate."

After dishes, in her room, Ami opened her schoolbook again. The red cover caught the lamplight, glowing, the pages inside creamy and smooth. She turned them slowly, but soon the words blurred and shifted, refusing to stay still. She began to daydream.

First, of her father, the frozen waterfall he had climbed, and the silence he left behind. They'd been forced to leave Trondheim after his death, and move to Taipei, with Ruisi's parents, until they could apply for Taipei government-subsidized social housing.

Ami found a Marvels page on 'Air Balloons', then one on 'Bicycles'. But something had changed. The pages were no longer paper, but richer and heavier, like napped leather. She felt silly now: Where was, 'Cheese Whiz,' and,... 'Dreamsicles,' and,... 'Escalators'?

Suddenly the room tilted, then dissolved. She was sitting in an old workshop—dim, grinding, humming, dust like pale ghosts in the air. A wheel spun, throwing jewels of light into the shadows. A master craftsman bent close, strong hands guiding the stone.

'Take this,' he said, placing a glowing gem onto her palm. The garnet fractured into a dozen landscapes—mountains, rivers, a ribbon of silver unspooling upward, leading somewhere she had never been. Ami looked deep into the gem. Deeper ... deeper ....

The craftroom and the craftsman dissolved, and she found herself on a moving stair, an escalator, gliding over the top of steep mountains. She held the rail, her fingers brushing silvery cobwebs from the air. In the pale sunlight she flew above tree-capped mountains.

Cranes wheeled above, white-and-black feathers against the clouds, and Ami thought:

‘This is what freedom feels like, to step outside of the past, riding into a new dream.’

The mountains leaned in close. Mist curled around her like a kitten, and a wide rainbow far above framed a waterfall turning to mist at its base. She wanted to tell her brother, quick, come see, but Tán was already there, leaping, laughing, balancing on nothing.

She followed, heart pounding, until the roar of water swallowed her breath. Rainbows shone within the spray, brighter than any chalk or paint. She stood at the edge, caught between fear and wonder, while her brother soared weightless, as if the world had given him wings. Then the waterfall’s updraft lifted her outstretched arms up into the air too.

Ami shut her eyes and soared higher and higher, circling Tán and those two majestic cranes. Over the roar of the waterfall, she heard a faint, *'Play with me.'* She looked over at Tán, and he seemed to gesture to her, his voice louder, *'Come play with me!'* She felt a tug on her arm, the rainbow light dimmed, and a flurry of snow-white blossoms fell suddenly around her. The blue sky turned conch-pink and pale-green with evening … and she was back in her room. She'd fallen asleep on her open schoolbook.

Tán stood there, tugging her arm, *"Play with me!"* His face was part frown, part mirth.

Ruisi walked in through the open door of their bedroom then. "Alright, mister, it's time to go to sleep! No more play time. Ami, you'll have to write your school assignment later tomorrow, after we get home from the temple. We're going to make a pilgrimage and offering for your Dáda, to let him know we're still safe and well."

Ruisi helped Tán into his pajamas while Ami brushed her teeth, then the two children snuggled into their low pallet beds. Ruisi rolled out a mat for herself to sleep on, in the little spare bedroom of the childrens' Năinai and Yéyye's house, her Chinese parents.

Tán chuckled to himself in a singsong voice. Ruisi shushed him. She thought of Robert, his aching absence, and how his accidental death upended their lives and their futures. Ami lay there, listening to their breath, daydreaming on the ceiling. She was in a dark forest, in a new future, Tán beside her, spirit warriors with their fiery white tigers.

Ahead on their path, a hidden temple, where Lü Dongbin waited — one of the Eight Immortals, smiling in bronze armor, his sword upright like a compass needle. Ami and Tán bowed in respect, and in the stillness, a muffled gong sounded. *Booooong*. Lü Dongbin bowed in return, and swept his arm towards the waiting temple gate, grown richly aged within a grove of Bodhi, Sal and Asoka trees. Then Ami sighed, and slept.

—----

I woke with the taste of clouds on my tongue and the echo of tiger purrs rumbling in my heart. My dream—the one with the escalator through the mist and the white tigers who let us walk beside—still felt more real than the sunlight poking through the window.

For a second, I was still there, in that spirit world where Tán and I were warriors. Then I blinked, and I was real again, in my room at Năinai and Yéyye's house, with the smell of congee and pickled vegetables drifting down the hall.

"Ami! Tán! Time for breakfast." Mama's voice was like a soft bell, pulling us the rest of the way into the day.

At the table, she placed a steaming bowl in front of me. She was already dressed, not in her usual home clothes, but in a simple shān kù of beige top and brown slacks. "Today, we'll have an adventure," she said. "Up the mountain. To a special place, an old temple."

"A temple?" I asked, my dream, wait … was it a dream?

"Yes. A temple. We will go to…" She paused, choosing her words carefully for Tán. "…send a message to Bàba. To tell him we are thinking of him and that we are well."

Tán, his mouth full of rice, looked up. "Can we send a picture? Of my HIGH GODO?"

Mama smiled, a small, gentle thing that didn't quite reach her eyes. "We will send something better. We will send incense smoke and quiet hopes. They travel farther."

An hour later, we were on a New Taipei bus traveling out of the city. The crowded streets, beeping scooters, tuktuks and bicycles, slowly gave way to mountains. The air changed. In the city, it tasted of exhaust and smelled of fried dough. Out here, it began to taste of damp earth and wild things growing.

We got off at a small lane stop and walked awhile. At the top, another lane, and a ring of tea hut and fruit vendors, little more than wooden shacks with mist-weathered roofs.

“First, we rest,” Mama said, guiding us to a tea hut off a path marked with a smiling Buddha. An old woman with a face like a walnut shell brought us cups of pale green tea. Tán pointed at a plate of sunflower seed cookies. “Can we send those to Bàba?”

The stone steps behind the hut were ancient, worn smooth and uneven by a *thousand thousand* footsteps. Tán ran on ahead, while Mama and I enjoyed the feeling of entering a mystical realm, one measured step at a time. The stairway climbed steeply into the bamboo forest, that closed around us like a green cathedral.

The air was cool and smelled incredible—like fresh rain and old, sweet wood. Sunlight filtered down in shattered pieces, painting shifting patterns on the path. It was so quiet, the only sounds our breathing and soft crunch of Tán eating his cookies, Bàba forgotten. I half-expected to see one of my dream-tigers padding silently along behind us.

The stone steps ended at a service lane, where a funicular track began. The rails led straight up like an iron ladder, and far above, the service cart was parked. We were lost.

“Let’s see where this goes,” Mama shrugged, and Tán started up with a whee! Using the railroad ties as steps, leaned forward like monkeys, we climbed hand and foot. Tán scrambled ahead of me, giggling, like it was the best playground ever.

As we climbed higher, the world dropped away. Through the gaps in the trees, I could see the entire valley, the river a silver ribbon, and our new city a hazy smudge of gray and white in the distance. It looked small and quiet from up here.

Finally, we pulled ourselves over the last ledge and onto a vast, flat stone verandah.

It was like stepping into my dream. The world had opened up to a vista. The forested mountains hunched like sleeping dragons on our left. Straight ahead, the verandah's edge fell away into nothingness, offering a dizzying, breathtaking view of the valley and the distant city skyline.

And on our right, rising from the mountain itself, was the temple. Its curved roof, layered like the wings of a giant bird, was topped with glazed tiles that shimmered in the light. A huge wooden door, dark red and carved with coiling dragons, stood open, silent and waiting.

It was utterly quiet. We were the only people there.

Mama led us toward the entrance. "This is a place of peace," she whispered. Her voice was low and full of something I hadn't heard before—a kind of sure, deep calm. "We leave the noisy world behind."

Just inside the main hall, an old monk sat on a stool, his eyes closed. Before him was a small table with three bundles of long, thin joss sticks. Mama placed a few yuan in a wooden box and took one bundle. She handed one stick each to me and Tán, keeping three for herself.

She led us to a large, black iron incense burner in the center of the courtyard, its belly full of gray ash. With a long match, she lit her three sticks. They caught flame, a bright orange star, which she gently waved until it died, leaving the ends glowing red and smoking.

"Watch," she whispered.

She held the sticks at her forehead, closed her eyes, and stood perfectly still for a long moment, her lips moving silently. She then bowed deeply three times, forward from her waist, before carefully placing her smoldering sticks upright into the ash of the burner.

“Your turn,” she said softly. “Light your stick from mine. Think of Bàba. Send him your message. It can be a word, a picture in your mind, a feeling. Then bow three times, to show respect.”

Tán went first, his little face screwed up in intense concentration. He whispered, “I got a new toy. It’s silver and red. He’s HIGH GODO!” Tán gave three quick, clumsy bows and stuck his joss stick into the burner.

Then it was my turn. I held the tip of my stick to the glowing embers of Mama’s until a thin thread of smoke began to curl into the air. I closed my eyes.

What was my message? *'I miss you'* felt too small. *'Why did you go?'* felt too big.

A picture came into my head. It was from my dream last night. It was me and Tán, not as we are, but as we were, warriors with the white tigers: strong and unafraid, walking together through a beautiful, mysterious world.

I thought of that feeling—not of being protected, but of being a protector. Of being connected to something ancient and powerful. We are okay, I thought, pouring the feeling into the smoke. We are strong. We are together.

I opened my eyes, bowed three times—slowly, respectfully, the way Mama had—and placed my joss stick with theirs. The three thin lines of smoke twisted together into a single column, rising straight up into the still air before the mountain breeze caught it and carried it away over the valley.

It was a quiet so complete it had its own sound – the sound of the mountain breathing. And then, another sound joined it.

Booooong.

It was deep and vast, a vibration you felt in your chest before you heard it with your ears. It was the temple bell.

I leaned my head against the cool glass and replayed the sound of the bell in my mind, sending it like a message to a memory, and to the future. It rang again and again.

Booooong…. We are okay, Bàba.

Booooong…. We are strong.

Booooong…. We are together.

Booooong…. We are warriors.

Afterword

There once was an old man who could whistle. He could whistle bird songs with pursed lips, true and clear as tiny bells. He'd whistle odd rhythms across his teeth, while he browsed in his old books, and could even whistle in endless loops, inhaling & exhaling, both!

The old man liked to sit in the park by the central fountain and whistle to the pigeons. Others visiting the park found this annoying. Soon there were too many pigeons (and even strange odd little children gathering), with nowhere left for people to sit!

The others loudly complained to him, *'Stop your whistling for once, will you!'*

So the old man whistled up a bunch of stories instead.

As time passages.

Makesong Passage takes you on an incredible journey through worlds of Art-and-Prose that defy imagination!

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